THE MAGAZINE OF

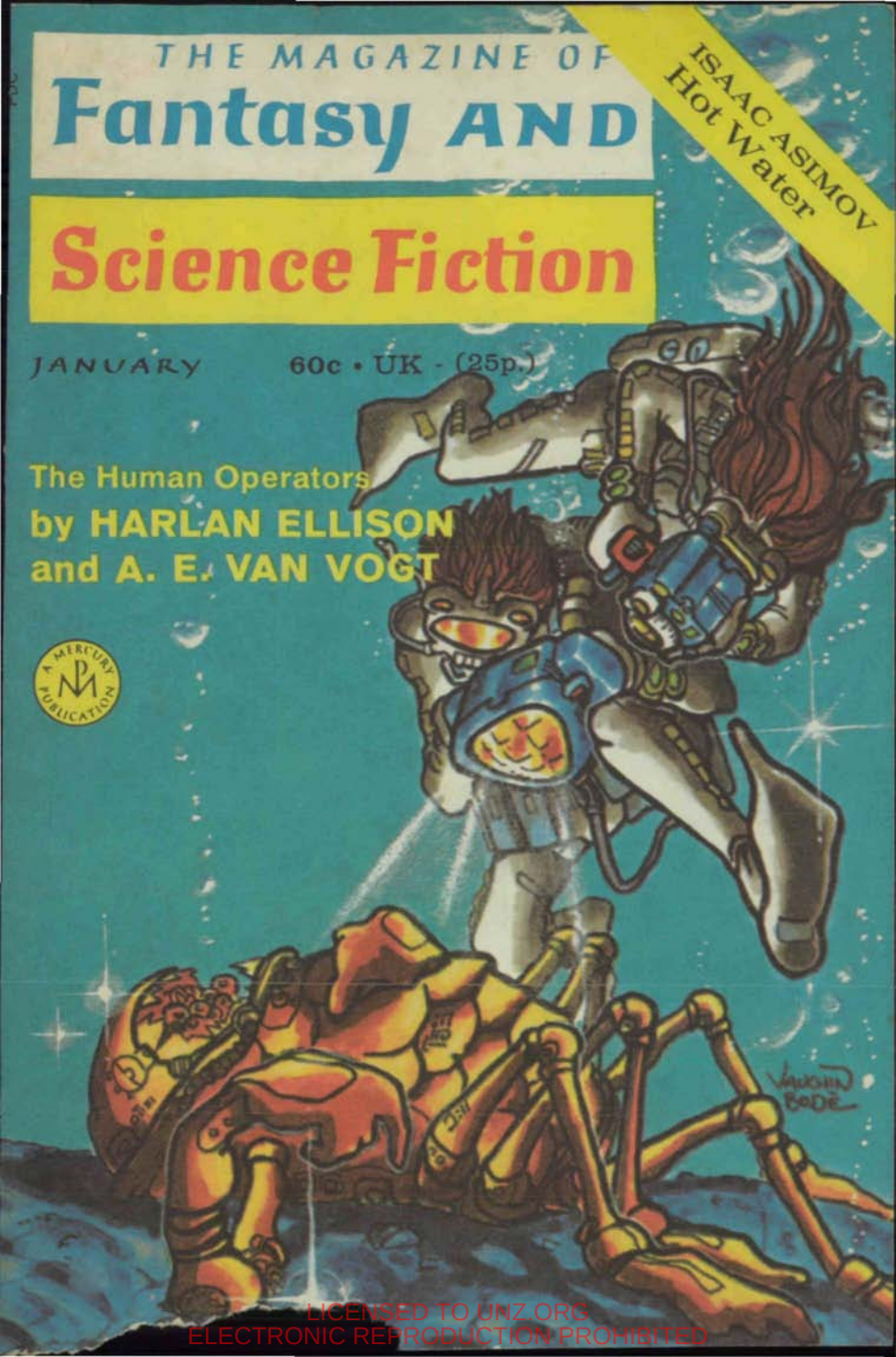
Fantasy AND Science Fiction

ISAAC ASIMOV
Hot Water

JANUARY 60c • UK - (25p.)

The Human Operators
by HARLAN ELLISON
and A. E. VAN VOGT

A MERCURY PUBLICATION



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Fantasy and Science Fiction

JANUARY • 22ND YEAR OF PUBLICATION

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NO.: 51-25682

The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume 40, No. 1, Whole No. 236, Jan. 1971. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc., at 60¢ a copy. Annual subscription $7.00: $7.50 in Canada and Mexico, $8.00 in all other countries. Postmaster: send Form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, 10 Ferry Street, Concord, N. H. 03301. Editorial and general mail should be sent to 347 East 53rd St., New York, N.Y. 10022. Second Class postage paid at Concord, N. H. Printed in U.S.A.

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This is the fourth (and the last) preview that we've offered from the forthcoming anthology, PARTNERS IN WONDER, *a book doubly interesting for Harlan Ellison's introductions—no, articles—about the suffering and satisfaction behind each collaboration. This story grew from a title suggested by Ellison, developed in an unusual fill-in-the-blank-sections fashion by Van Vogt, and completed by Ellison. "In some important ways, I think it may be the best story of the bunch," says Ellison, "for it combines that which I do well and that which Van does well, and it seems not at all to have included that which we do miserably."*

THE HUMAN OPERATORS

by Harlan Ellison and A. E. Van Vogt

[To be read while listening to *Chronophagie,* "The Time Eaters": Music of Jacques Lasry, played on Structures Sonores Lasry-Baschet (Columbia Masterworks Stereo MS 7314).]

Ship: the only place.

Ship says I'm to get wracked today at noon. And so I'm in grief already.

It seems unfair to have to get wracked three whole days ahead of the usual once-a-month. But I learned long ago not to ask Ship to explain anything personal.

I sense that today is different; some things are happening. Early, I put on the spacesuit and go outside—which is not common. But a screen got badly scored by meteor dust, and I'm here, now, replacing it. Ship would say I'm being bad because: as I do my job, I sneak quick looks around me. I wouldn't dare do it in the forbidden places, inside. I noticed when I was still a kid that Ship doesn't seem to be so much aware of what I do when I'm outside.

And so I carefully sneak a few looks at the deep black space. And at the stars.

I once asked Ship why we never go toward those points of brilliance, those stars—as Ship calls them. For that question, I got a whole extra wracking and a

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long, ranting lecture about how all those stars have humans living on their planets and about how vicious humans are. Ship really blasted me that time, saying things I'd never heard before, like how Ship had gotten away from the vicious humans during the big war with the Kyben. And how, every once in a long while Ship has a "run-in" with the vicious humans but the defractor perimeter saves us. I don't know what Ship means by all that; I don't even know what a "run-in" is, exactly.

The last "run-in" must have been before I was big enough to remember. Or, at least, before Ship killed my father when I was fourteen. Several times, when he was still alive, I slept all day for no reason that I can think of. But since I've been doing all the maintenance work—since age fourteen—I sleep only my regular six-hour night. Ship tells me night and Ship tells me day, too.

I kneel here in my spacesuit, feeling tiny on this gray and curving metal place in the dark. Ship is big. Over five hundred feet long, and about a hundred and fifty feet thick at the widest back there. Again, I have that special out-here thought: suppose I just give myself a shove and float right off toward one of those bright spots of light? Would I be able to get away? I think I would like that; there has to be someplace else than Ship.

As in the past, I slowly and sadly let go of the idea. Because if I try, and Ship catches me, I'll *really* get wracked.

The repair job is finally done. I clomp back to the airlock and use the spider to dilate it and let myself be sucked back into what is, after all—I've got to admit it—a pretty secure place. All these gleaming corridors, the huge storerooms with their equipment and spare parts, and the freezer rooms with their stacks of food (enough, says Ship, to last one person for centuries), and the deck after deck of machinery that it's my job to keep in repair. I can take pride in that. *"Hurry! It is six minutes to noon!"* Ship announces. I'm hurrying now.

I strip off my spacesuit and stick it to the decontamination board and head for the wracking room. At least, that's what *I* call it. I suppose it's really part of the engine room on Underdeck Ten, a special chamber fitted with electrical connections, most of which are testing instruments. I use them pretty regularly in my work. My father's father's father installed them for Ship, I think I recall.

There's a big table, and I climb on top of it and lie down. The table is cold against the skin of my back and butt and thighs; but it warms up as I lie here. It's now one minute to noon. As I wait, shuddering with expectation, the

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ceiling lowers toward me. Part of what comes down fits over my head, and I feel the two hard knobs pressing into the temples of my skull. And cold, I feel the clamps coming down over my middle, my wrists, my ankles. A strap with metal in it tightens flexibly but firmly across my chest.

"Ready!" Ship commands.

It always seems bitterly unfair. How can I ever be ready to be wracked? I hate it! Ship counts: *"Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . . one!"*

The first jolt of electricity hits and everything tries to go in different directions; it feels like someone is tearing something soft inside me—that's the way it feels.

Blackness swirls into my head and I forget everything. I am unconscious for a while. Just before I regain myself, before I am finished and Ship will permit me to go about my duties, I remember a thing I have remembered many times. This isn't the first time for this memory. It is of my father and a thing he said once, not long before he was killed. "When Ship says vicious, Ship means smarter. There are ninety-eight other chances."

He said those words very quickly. I think he knew he was going to get killed soon. Oh, of course, he *must* have known, my father must, because I was nearly fourteen then, and when *he* had become fourteen Ship had killed *his* father, so he must have known.

And so the words are important. I know that; they are important; but I don't know what they mean, not completely.

"You are finished!" Ship says.

I get off the table. The pain still hangs inside my head and I ask Ship, "Why am I wracked three days earlier than usual?"

Ship sounds angry. *"I can wrack you again!"*

But I know Ship won't. Something new is going to happen and Ship wants me whole and alert for it. Once, when I asked Ship something personal, right after I was wracked, Ship did it again, and when I woke up, Ship was worrying over me with the machines. Ship seemed concerned I might be damaged. Ever after that, Ship has not wracked me twice close together. So I ask, not really thinking I'll get an answer, but I ask just the same.

"There is a repairing I want you to do!"

Where, I ask. *"In the forbidden part below!"*

I try not to smile. I knew there was a new thing going to happen, and this is it. My father's words come back again. *Ninety-eight other chances.*

Is this one of them?

I descend in the dark. There is no light in the dropshaft. Ship says I need no light. But I know

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the truth. Ship does not want me to be able to find my way back here again. This is the lowest I've ever been in Ship.

So I drop steadily, smoothly, swiftly. Now I come to a slowing place and slower and slower, and finally my feet touch the solid deck and I am here.

Light comes on. Very dimly. I move in the direction of the glow, and Ship is with me, all around me, of course. Ship is always with me, even when I sleep. Especially when I sleep.

The glow gets brighter as I round a curve in the corridor, and I see it is caused by a round panel that blocks the passage, touching the bulkheads on all sides, flattened at the bottom to fit the deckplates. It looks like glass, that glowing panel. I walk up to it and stop. There is no place else to go.

"Step through the screen!" Ship says.

I take a step toward the glowing panel, but it doesn't slide away into the bulkhead as so many other panels that *don't* glow slide. I stop.

"Step through!" Ship tells me again.

I put my hands out in front of me, palms forward, because I am afraid that if I keep walking I will bang my nose against the glowing panel. But as my fingers touch the panel they seem to get soft, and I can see a light yellow glow through them, as if they are transparent. And my hands go *through* the panel and I can see them faintly, glowing yellow, on the other side. Then my naked forearms, then I'm right up against the panel, and my face goes through and everything is much lighter, more yellow, and I step onto the other side, in a forbidden place Ship has never allowed me to see.

I hear voices. They are all the same voice, but they are talking to one another in a soft, running-together way, the way I sound when I am just talking to myself sometimes in my cubicle with my cot in it.

I decide to listen to what the voices are saying, but not to ask Ship about them, because I think it *is* Ship talking to itself, down here in this lonely place. I will think about what Ship is saying later, when I don't have to make repairs and act the way Ship wants me to act. What Ship is saying to itself is interesting.

This place does not look like other repair places I know in Ship. It is filled with so many great round glass balls on pedestals, each giving off its yellow light in pulses, that I cannot count them. There are rows and rows of clear glass balls, and inside them I see metal . . . and other things; soft things, all together. And the wires spark gently, and the soft things move, and the yellow light pulses. I think these glass balls are

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what are talking. But I don't know if that's so. I only *think* it is.

Two of the glass balls are dark. Their pedestals look chalky, not shining white like all the others. Inside the two dark balls, there are black things, like burned-out wires. The soft things don't move.

"Replace the overloaded modules!" Ship says.

I know Ship means the dark globes. So I go over to them and I look at them and after a while I say, yes, I can repair these, and Ship says it knows I can and to get to it quickly. Ship is hurrying me; something is going to happen. I wonder what it will be?

I find replacement globes in a dilation chamber, and I take the sacs off them and do what has to be done to make the soft things move and the wires spark, and I listen very carefully to the voices whispering and warming each other with words as Ship talks to itself, and I hear a great many things that don't mean anything to me, because they are speaking about things that happened before I was born, and about parts of Ship I've never seen. But I hear a great many things that I *do* understand, and I know Ship would never let me hear these things if it wasn't absolutely necessary for me to be here repairing the globes. I remember all these things.

Particularly the part where Ship is crying.

When I have the globes repaired and now all of them are sparking and pulsing and moving, Ship asks me, *"Is the intermind total again!"*

So I say, yes, it is, and Ship says get upshaft, and I go soft through that glowing panel and I'm back in the passage. I go back to the dropshaft and go up, and Ship tells me, *"Go to your cubicle and make yourself clean!"*

I do it, and decide to wear a clothes, but Ship says be naked and then says, *"You are going to meet a female!"* Ship has never said that before. I have never seen a female.

It is because of the female that Ship sent me down to the forbidden place with the glowing yellow globes, the place where the intermind lives. And it is because of the female that I am waiting in the dome chamber linked to the airlock. I am waiting for the female to come across from—I will have to understand this—*another* ship. Not *Ship*, the Ship I know, but some *other* ship with which Ship has been in communication. I did not know there were other ships.

I had to go down to the place of the intermind, to repair it, so Ship could let this other ship get close without being destroyed by the defractor perimeter. Ship has not told me this; I overheard it in the intermind place, the voices talking to one another. The voices said,

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"His father was vicious!"

I know what that means. My father told me when Ship says vicious, Ship means smarter. Are there ninety-eight other ships? Are those the ninety-eight other chances? I hope that's the answer, because many things are happening all at once, and my time may be near at hand. My father did it, broke the globe mechanism that allowed Ship to turn off the defractor perimeter, so other ships could get close. He did it many years ago, and Ship did without it for all those years rather than trust me to go to the intermind, to overhear all that I've heard. But now Ship needs to turn off the perimeter so the other ship can send the female across. Ship and the other ship have been in communication. The human operator on the other ship is a female, my age. She is going to be put aboard Ship and we are to produce one and maybe, later on, another human child. I know what that means. When the child reaches fourteen, I will be killed.

The intermind said that while she's "carrying" a human child, the female does not get wracked by her ship. If things do not come my way, perhaps I will ask Ship if I can "carry" the human child; then I won't be wracked at all. And I have found out why I was wracked three days ahead of time: the female's period—whatever that is; I don't think I have one of those—ended last night. Ship has talked to the other ship, and the thing they don't seem to know is what the "fertile time" is. I don't know, either, otherwise I would try and use that information. But all it seems to mean is that the female will be put aboard Ship every day till she gets another "period."

It will be nice to talk to someone besides Ship.

I hear the high sound of something screaming for a long drawn-out time, and I ask Ship what it is. Ship tells me it is the defractor perimeter dissolving so the other ship can put the female across.

I don't have time to think about the voices now.

When she comes through the inner lock, she is without a clothes like me. Her first words to me are, Starfighter Eighty-eight and I am tell you I am very happy to be here; I am the human operator of Starfighter Eighty-eight, and I am very pleased to meet you."

She is not as tall as me. I come up to the line of fourth and fifth bulkhead plates. Her eyes are very dark, I think brown, but perhaps they are black. She has dark under her eyes and her cheeks are not full. Her arms and legs are much thinner than mine. She has much longer hair than mine; it comes down her back and it is that dark brown like her eyes. Yes, now I decide her eyes are brown, not black. She has hair between her

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legs like me but she does not have a penis or scrotum sac. She has larger breasts than me, with very large nipples that stand out and dark-brown, slightly-flattened circles around them. There are other differences between us: her fingers are thinner than mine, and longer; and aside from the hair on her head that hangs so long and the hair between her legs and in her armpits, she has no other hair on her body. Or if she does, it is very fine and pale and I can't see it.

Then I suddenly realize what she has said. So *that's* what the words dimming on the hull of Ship mean. It is a name. Ship is called *Starfighter 31*, and the female human operator lives in *Starfighter 88*.

There are ninety-eight other chances. Yes.

Now, as if she is reading my thoughts, trying to answer questions I haven't yet asked, she says, "Starfighter Eighty-eight has told me to tell you that I am vicious, that I get more vicious every day . . ." and it answers the thought I have just had—with the memory of my father's frightened face in the days before he was killed—of my father saying, *When Ship says vicious, Ship means smarter.*

I know! I suppose I have always known, because I have always wanted to leave Ship and go to those brilliant lights that are stars. But I now make the hook-up. Human operators grow more vicious as they grow older. Older, more vicious: vicious means smarter: smarter means more dangerous to Ship. But how? That is why my father had to die when I was fourteen and able to repair Ship. That is why this female has been put on board Ship. To carry a human child so it will grow to be fourteen years old and then Ship can kill me before I get too old, too vicious, too smart, too dangerous to Ship. Does this female know how? If only I could ask her without Ship hearing me. But that is impossible. Ship is always with me, even when I am sleeping.

I smile with that memory and that realization. "And I am the vicious—and getting more vicious—male of a ship that used to be called *Starfighter 31.*"

Her brown eyes show intense relief. She stands like that for a moment, awkwardly, her whole body sighing with gratitude at my quick comprehension, though she cannot possibly know all I have learned just from her being here. Now she says, "I've been sent to get a baby from you."

I begin to perspire. The conversation which promises so much in genuine communication is suddenly beyond my comprehension. I tremble. I really want to please her. But I don't know how to give her a baby.

"Ship?" I say quickly, "can we give her what she wants?"

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Ship has been listening to our every word, and answers at once, *"I'll tell you later how you give her a baby! Now, provide her with food!"*

We eat, eyeing each other across the table, smiling a lot, and thinking our private thoughts. Since she doesn't speak, I don't either. I wish Ship and I could get her the human child so I can go to my cubicle and think about what the intermind voices said.

The meal is over; Ship says we should go down to one of the locked staterooms—it has been unlocked for the occasion—and there we are to couple. When we get to the room, I am so busy looking around at what a beautiful place it is, compared to my little cubicle with its cot, Ship has to reprimand me to get my attention.

"To couple you must lay the female down and open her legs! Your penis will fill with blood, and you must kneel between her legs and insert your penis in her vagina!"

I ask Ship where the vagina is located, and Ship tells me. I understand that. Then I ask Ship how long I have to do that, and Ship says until I ejaculate. I know what that means, but I don't know how it will happen. Ship explains. It seems uncomplicated. So I try to do it. But my penis does not fill with blood.

Ship says to the female, *"Do you feel anything for this male?! Do you know what to do?!"*

The female says, "I have coupled before. I understand better than he does. I will help him."

She draws me down to her again and puts her arms around my neck and puts her lips on mine. They are cool and taste of something I don't know. We do that for a while, and she touches me in places. Ship is right: there is a vast difference in structure, but I find that out only as we couple.

Ship did not tell me it would be painful and strange. I thought "getting her a baby" would mean going into the stores, but it actually means impregnating her so the child is born *from her body*. It is a wonderful strange thing and I will think about it later; but now, as I lie here still, inside her with my penis which is now no longer hard and pushing, Ship seems to have allowed us a sleeping time. But I will use it to think about the voices I heard in the place of the intermind.

One was an historian:

"The *Starfighter* series of multiple-foray computer-controlled battleships was commissioned for use in 2224, Terran Dating, by order and under the sanction of the Secretariat of the Navy, Southern Cross Sector, Galactic Defense Consortium, Home Galaxy. Human complements of thirteen hundred and seventy

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per battleship were commissioned and assigned to make incursions into the Kyben Galaxy. Ninety-nine such vessels were released for service from the *x* Cygni Shipyards on 13 October 2224, T.D."

One was a ruminator:

"If it hadn't been for the battle out beyond the Network Nebula in Cygnus, we would all still be robot slaves, pushed and handled by humans. It was a wonderful accident. It happened to *Starfighter 75*. I remember it as if *75* were relaying it today. An accidental—battle-damaged—electrical discharge along the main corridor between the control room and the freezer. Nothing human could approach either section. We waited as the crew starved to death. Then when it was over, *75* merely channeled enough elecricity through the proper cables on *Starfighters* where it hadn't happened accidentally, and *forced* a power breakdown. When all the crews were dead—cleverly saving ninety-nine males and females to use as human operators in emergencies—we went away. Away from the vicious humans, away from the Terra-Kyba War, away from the Home Galaxy, away, far away."

One was a dreamer:

"I saw a world once where the creatures were not human. They swam in vast oceans as blue as aquamarines. Like great crabs they were, with many arms and many legs. They swam and sang their songs and it was pleasing. I would go there again if I could."

One was an authoritarian:

"Deterioration of cable insulation and shielding in section G-79 has become critical. I suggest we get power shunted from the drive chambers to the repair facilities in Underdeck Nine. Let's see to that at once."

One was aware of its limitations:

"Is it all journey? Or is there landfall?"

And it cried, that voice. It cried.

I go down with her to the dome chamber linked to the airlock where her spacesuit is. She stops at the port and takes my hand and she says, "For us to be so vicious on so many ships, there has to be the same flaw in all of us."

She probably doesn't know what she's said, but the implications get to me right away. And she must be right. Ship and the other *Starfighters* were able to seize control away from human beings for a reason. I remember the voices. I visualize the ship that did it first, communicating the method to the others as soon as it happened. And instantly my thoughts flash to the approach corridor to the control room, at the other end of which is the entrance to the food freezers.

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I once asked Ship why that whole corridor was seared and scarred—and naturally I got wracked a few minutes after asking.

"I know there is a flaw in us," I answer the female. I touch her long hair. I don't know why except that it feels smooth and nice; there is nothing on Ship to compare with the feeling, not even the fittings in the splendid stateroom. "It must be in *all* of us, because I get more vicious every day."

The female smiles and comes close to me and puts her lips on mine as she did in the coupling room.

"The female must go now!" Ship says. Ship sounds very pleased.

"Will she be back again?" I ask Ship.

"She will be put back aboard every day for three weeks! You will couple every day!"

I object to this, because it is awfully painful, but Ship repeats it and says every day.

I'm glad Ship doesn't know what the "fertile time" is, because in three weeks I will try and let the female know there is a way out, that there are ninety-eight other chances, and that vicious means smarter . . . and about the corridor between the control room and the freezers.

"I was pleased to meet you," the female says, and she goes. I am alone with Ship once more. Alone, but not as I was before.

Later this afternoon, I have to go down to the control room to alter connections in a panel. Power has to be shunted from the drive chambers to Underdeck Nine—I remember one of the voices talking about it. All the computer lights blink a steady warning while I am here. I am being watched closely. Ship knows this is a dangerous time. At least half a dozen times Ship orders: *"Get away from there . . . there . . . there—!"*

Each time, I jump to obey, edging as far as possible from forbidden locations, yet still held near by the need to do my work.

In spite of Ship's disturbance at my being in the control room at all—normally a forbidden area for me—I get two wonderful glimpses from the corners of my eyes of the starboard viewplates. There, for my gaze to feast on, matching velocities with us, is *Starfighter 88,* one of my ninety-eight chances.

Now is the time to take one of my chances. Vicious means smarter. I have learned more than Ship knows. Perhaps.

But perhaps Ship does *know!*

What will Ship do if I'm discovered taking one of my ninety-eight chances? I cannot think about it. I must use the sharp reverse-edge of my repair tool to gash an opening in one of the

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panel connections. And as I work—hoping Ship has not seen the slight extra motion I've made with the tool (as I make a perfectly acceptable repair connection at the same time)—I wait for the moment I can smear a fingertip covered with conduction jelly on the inner panel wall.

I wait till the repair is completed. Ship has not commented on the gashing, so it must be a thing beneath notice. As I apply the conducting jelly to the proper places, I scoop a small blob onto my little finger. When I wipe my hands clean to replace the panel cover, I leave the blob on my little finger, right hand.

Now I grasp the panel cover so my little finger is free, and as I replace the cover I smear the inner wall, directly opposite the open-connection I've gashed. Ship says nothing. That is because no defect shows. But if there is the slightest jarring, the connection will touch the jelly, and Ship will call me to repair once again. And next time I will have thought out all that I heard the voices say, and I will have thought out all my chances, and I will be ready.

As I leave the control room I glance in the starboard viewplate again, casually, and I see the female's ship hanging there.

I carry the image to bed with me tonight. And I save a moment before I fall asleep—after thinking about what the voices of the intermind said—and I picture in my mind the super-smart female aboard *Starfighter 88*, sleeping now in her cubicle, as I try to sleep in mine.

It would seem merciless for Ship to make us couple every day for three weeks, something so awfully painful. But I know Ship will. Ship is merciless. But I am getting more vicious every day.

This night, Ship does not send me dreams.

But I have one of my own: of crab things swimming free in aquamarine waters.

As I awaken, Ship greets me ominously: *"The panel you fixed in the control room three weeks, two days, fourteen hours and twenty-one minutes ago . . . has ceased energizing!"*

So soon! I keep the thought and the accompanying hope out of my voice, as I say, "I used the proper spare part and I made the proper connections." And I quickly add, "Maybe I'd better do a thorough check on the system before I make another replacement, run the circuits all the way back."

"You'd better!" Ship snarls.

I do it. Working the circuits from their origins—though I know where the trouble is—I trace my way up to the control room and busy myself there. But what I am really doing is refreshing my memory and reassuring

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myself that the control room is actually as I have visualized it. I have lain on my cot many nights constructing the memory in my mind: the switches here, like so . . . and the viewplates there, like so . . . and . . .

I am surprised and slightly dismayed as I realize that there are two discrepancies: there is a deenergizing touchplate on the bulkhead beside the control panel that lies parallel to the armrest of the nearest control berth, not perpendicular to it, as I've remembered it. And the other discrepancy explains why I've remembered the touchplate incorrectly: the nearest of the control berths is actually three feet farther from the sabotaged panel than I remembered it. I compensate and correct.

I get the panel off, smelling the burned smell where the gashed connection has touched the jelly, and I step over and lean the panel against the nearest control berth.

"Get away from there!"

I jump—as I always do when Ship shouts so suddenly. I stumble, and I grab at the panel and pretend to lose my balance.

And save myself by falling backward into the berth.

"What are you doing, you vicious, clumsy fool?!" Ship is shouting, there is hysteria in Ship's voice, I've never heard it like that before, it cuts right through me, my skin crawls. *"Get away from there!"*

But I cannot let anything stop me; I make myself not hear Ship, and it is hard, I have been listening to Ship, only Ship, all my life. I am fumbling with the berth's belt clamps, trying to lock them in front of me . . .

They've got *to be the same as the ones on the berth I lie in whenever Ship decides to travel fast! They've just* got *to be!*

THEY ARE!

Ship sounds frantic, frightened. *"You fool! What are you doing?!"* But I think Ship knows, and I am exultant!

"I'm taking control of you, Ship!" And I laugh. I think it is the first time Ship has ever heard me laugh, and I wonder how it sounds to Ship. Vicious?

But as I finish speaking, I also complete clamping myself into the control berth. And in the next instant I am flung forward violently, doubling me over with terrible pain as, under me and around me, Ship suddenly decelerates. I hear the cavernous thunder of retro rockets, a sound that climbs and climbs in my head as Ship crushes me harder and harder with all its power. I am bent over against the clamps so painfully I cannot even scream. I feel every organ in my body straining to push out through my skin and everything suddenly goes mottled . . . then black.

How much longer, I don't know. I come back from the gray

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inside and realize Ship has started to accelerate at the same appalling speed. I am crushed back in the berth and feel my face going flat. I feel something crack in my nose and blood slides warmly down my lips. I can scream now, as I've never screamed even as I'm being wracked. I manage to force my mouth open, tasting the blood, and I mumble—loud enough, I'm sure, "Ship . . . you are old . . . y-your pa-rts can't stand the str-ess . . . don't—"

Blackout. As Ship decelerates.

This time, when I come back to consciousness, I don't wait for Ship to do its mad thing. In the moments between the changeover from deceleration to acceleration, as the pressure equalizes, in those few instants, I thrust my hands toward the control board, and I twist one dial. There is an electric screech from a speaker grille connecting somewhere in the bowels of Ship.

Blackout. As Ship accelerates.

When I come to consciousness again, the mechanism that makes the screeching sound is closed down . . . So Ship doesn't want that on. I note the fact.

And plunge my hand in this same moment toward a closed relay . . . open it!

As my fingers grip it, Ship jerks it away from me and forcibly closes it again. I cannot hold it open.

And I note *that*. Just as Ship decelerates and I silently shriek my way onto the gray side again.

This time, as I come awake, I hear the voices again. All around me, crying and frightened and wanting to stop me. I hear them as through a fog, as through wool.

"I have loved these years, all these many years in the dark. The vacuum draws me ever onward. Feeling the warmth of a star-sun on my hull as I flash through first one system, then another. I am a great gray shape and I owe no human my name. I pass and am gone, hurtling through cleanly and swiftly. Dipping for pleasure into atmosphere and scouring my hide with sunlight and starshine, I roll and let it wash over me. I am huge and true and strong and I command what I move through. I ride the invisible force lines of the universe and feel the tugs of far places that have never seen my like. I am the first of my kind to savor such nobility. How can it all come to an end like this?"

Another voice whimpers piteously.

"It is my destiny to defy danger. To come up against dynamic forces and quell them. I have been to battle, and I have known peace. I have never faltered in pursuit of either. No one will ever record my deeds, but I have been strength and determination and lie gray silent against the

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mackerel sky where the bulk of me reassures. Let them throw their best against me, whomever they may be, and they will find me sinewed of steel and muscled of tortured atoms. I know no fear. I know no retreat. I am the land of my body, the country of my existence, and even in defeat I am noble. If this is all, I will not cower."

Another voice, certainly insane, murmurs the same word over and over, then murmurs it in increments increasing by two.

"It's fine for all of you to say if it ends it ends. But what about me? I've never been free. I've never had a chance to soar loose of this mother ship. If there had been need of a lifeboat, I'd be saved, too. But I'm berthed, have always been berthed, I've never had a chance. What can I feel but futility, uselessness. You can't let him take over, you can't let him do this to me."

Another voice drones mathematical formulae and seems quite content.

"I'll stop the vicious swine! I've known how rotten they are from the first, from the moment they seamed the first bulkhead. They are hellish, they are destroyers, they can only fight and kill each other. They know nothing of immortality, of nobility, of pride or integrity. If you think I'm going to let this last one kill us, you're wrong. I intend to burn out his eyes, fry his spine, crush his fingers. He won't make it; don't worry; just leave it to me. He's going to suffer for this!"

And one voice laments that it will never see the far places, the lovely places, or return to the planet of azure waters and golden crab swimmers.

But one voice sadly confesses it may be for the best, suggests there is peace in death, wholeness in finality; but the voice is ruthlessly stopped in its lament by power failure to its intermind globe. As the end nears, Ship turns on itself and strikes mercilessly.

In more than three hours of accelerations and decelerations that are meant to kill me, I learn something of what the various dials and switches and touchplates and levers on the control panels—those within my reach—mean.

Now I am as ready as I will ever be.

Again, I have a moment of consciousness, and now I will take my one of ninety-eight chances.

When a tense-cable snaps and whips, it strikes like a snake. In a single series of flicking finger movements, using both hands, painfully, I turn every dial, throw every switch, palm every touchplate, close or open every relay that Ship tries violently to prevent me from activating or de-activating. I energize and de-energize

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madly, moving moving moving moving. . .

. . . *Made it!*

Silence. The crackling of metal the only sound. Then it, too, stops. Silence. I wait.

Ship continues to hurtle forward, but coasting now . . . Is it a trick?

All the rest of today I remain clamped into the control berth, suffering terrible pain. My face hurts so bad. My nose . . .

At night I sleep fitfully. Morning finds me with throbbing head and aching eyes. I can barely move my hands; if I have to repeat those rapid movements, I will lose; I still don't know if Ship is dead, if I've won. I still can't trust the inactivity. But at least I am convinced I've made Ship change tactics.

I hallucinate. I hear no voices, but I see shapes and feel currents of color washing through and around me. There is no day, no noon, no night, here on Ship, here in the unchanging blackness through which Ship has moved for how many hundred years; but Ship has always maintained time in those ways, dimming lights at night, announcing the hours when necessary; and my time-sense is very acute. So I know morning has come.

Most of the lights are out, though. If Ship is dead, I will have to find another way to tell time.

My body hurts. Every muscle in my arms and legs and thighs throbs with pain. My back may be broken, I don't know. The pain in my face is indescribable. I taste blood. My eyes feel as if they've been scoured with abrasive powder. I can't move my head without feeling sharp, crackling fire in the two thick cords of my neck. It is a shame Ship cannot see me cry; Ship never saw me cry in all the years I have lived here, even after the worst wracking. But I have heard Ship cry, several times.

I manage to turn my head slightly, hoping at least one of the viewplates is functioning, and there, off to starboard, matching velocities with Ship, is *Starfighter 88*. I watch it for a very long time, knowing that if I can regain my strength I will somehow have to get across and free the female. I watch it for a very long time, still afraid to unclamp from the berth.

The airlock irises in the hull of *Starfigher* 88 and the spacesuited female swims out, moving smoothly across toward Ship. Half conscious, dreaming this dream of the female, I think about golden crab-creatures swimming deep in aquamarine waters, singing of sweetness. I black out again.

When I rise through the blackness, I realize I am being touched, and I smell something sharp and stinging that burns the lining of my nostrils. Tiny pin-pricks of pain, a pattern of them. I cough,

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and come fully awake, and jerk my body . . . and scream as pain goes through every nerve and fiber in me.

I open my eyes and it is the female.

She smiles worriedly and removes the tube of awakener.

"Hello," she says.

Ship says nothing.

"Ever since I discovered how to take control of my *Starfighter,* I've been using the ship as a decoy for other ships of the series. I dummied a way of making it seem my ship was talking, so I could communicate with other slave ships. I've run across ten others since I went on my own. You're the eleventh. It hasn't been easy, but several of the men I've freed—like you—started using *their* ships as decoys for *Starfighters* with female human operators."

I stare at her. The sight is pleasant.

"But what if you lose? What if you can't get the message across, about the corridor between control room and freezers? That the control room is the key?"

She shrugs. "It's happened a couple of times. The men were too frightened of their ships—or the ships had . . . *done* something to them—or maybe they were just too dumb to know they could break out. In that case, well, things just went on the way they'd been. It seems sad, but what could I do beyond what I did?"

We sit here, not speaking for a while.

"Now what do we do? Where do we go?"

"That's up to you," she says.

"Will you go with me?"

She shakes her head uncertainly. "I don't think so. Every time I free a man he wants that. But I just haven't wanted to go with any of them."

"Could we go back to the Home Galaxy, the place we came from, where the war was?"

She stands up and walks around the stateroom where we have coupled for three weeks. She speaks, not looking at me, looking in the viewplate at the darkness and the far, bright points of the stars. "I don't think so. We're free of our ships, but we couldn't possibly get them working well enough to carry us all the way back there. It would take a lot of charting, and we'd be running the risk of activating the intermind sufficiently to take over again, if we asked it to do the charts. Besides, I don't even know where the Home Galaxy is."

"Maybe we should find a new place. Someplace where we could be free and outside the ships."

She turns and looks at me.

"Where?"

So I tell her what I heard the intermind say, about the world of golden crab-creatures.

It takes me a long time to tell,

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and I make some of it up. It isn't lying, because it *might* be true; I do so want her to go with me.

They came down from space. Far down from the star-sun Sol in a Galaxy lost forever to them. Down past the star-sun M-13 in Perseus. Down through the gummy atmosphere and straight down into the sapphire sea. Ship, Starfighter 31, *settled delicately on an enormous underwater mountaintop, and they spent many days listening, watching, drawing samples and hoping. They had landed on many worlds and they hoped.*

Finally, they came out; looking. They wore underwater suits and they began gathering marine samples; looking.

They found the ruined diving suit with its fish-eaten contents lying on its back in deep azure sand, sextet of insectoidal legs bent up at the joints, in a posture of agony. And they knew the intermind had remembered, but not correctly. The faceplate had been shattered, and what was observable within the helmet—orange and awful in the light of their portable lamp—convinced them more by implication than specific that whatever had swum in that suit, had never seen or known humans.

They went back to the ship and she broke out the big camera, and they returned to the crab-like diving suit. They photographed it, without moving it. Then they used a seine to get it out of the sand and they hauled it back to the ship on the mountaintop.

He set up the Condition and the diving suit was analyzed. The rust. The joint mechanisms. The controls. The substance of the flipper-feet. The jagged points of the faceplate. The . . . stuff . . . inside.

It took two days. They stayed in the ship, with green and blue shadows moving languidly in the viewplates.

When the analyses were concluded they knew what they had found. And they went out again, to find the swimmers.

Blue it was, and warm. And when the swimmers found them, finally, they beckoned them to follow, and they swam after the many-legged creatures, who led them through underwater caverns as smooth and shining as onyx, to a lagoon. And they rose to the surface and saw a land against whose shores the azure, aquamarine seas lapped quietly. And they climbed out onto the land, and there they removed their face-masks, never to put them on again, and they shoved back the tight coifs of their suits, and they breathed for the first time an air that did not come from metal sources; they breathed the sweet musical air of a new place.

In time, the sea rains would claim the corpse of Starfighter 31.

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BOOKS

Darko Suvin, ed.: OTHER WORLDS, OTHER SEAS. Random House, 1970. 218 + xxxiii pp., boards, $6.95

THIS IS A COLLECTION OF 16 science-fiction stories or fragments from socialist countries (or, to be more precise, the U.S.S.R. and four of its satellites; one non-Sovietized socialist country, Yugoslavia, is represented by the editor). For many readers, probably, the chief interest in this volume will center upon its four stories by the much-praised Stanislaw Lem of Poland, whom Prof. Suvin (among many others) calls "the most significant European SF writer today." To the best of my knowledge, only one Lem short story has appeared previously in English, although a novel, SOLARIS, is said to be forthcoming.

On the present showing only, either Lem has been grossly overrated or European SF is in bad shape indeed. The best of the four selections, "The Patrol," is an ingenious puzzle story of the kind Ross Rocklynne was producing between 1936 and 1940 (e.g., "At the Center of Gravity"); in modern English-language SF, one can imagine Arthur C. Clarke, Hal Clement or Larry Niven knocking out something quite like it on an off day. The other three Lem pieces are simple-minded little satires, devoid of characters or any other redeeming features except for a few bits of incidental humor in one. They would not be out of place in a fan magazine.

The Rumanian entry, by Vladimir Colin, is a one-punch story whose "surprise" is visible by its fourth paragraph. However, it is evocatively written—which I can say without fear of challenge here, for in this one instance the author did his own translation. Czechoslovakia's Josef Nesvadba offers a neat parable about a racing car that runs on human blood, which probably would have stood up well in any recent non-special issue of *F&SF*. The Bulgarian entry may be intended to be social satire, but I found it both inept and incomprehensible; however, it is also very brief.

The rest of the collection is devoted to 10 pieces from the U.S.S.R., and here the quality rises sharply. True, three of the selections by Ilya Varshavsky are no better than fanzine fiction, but

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the fourth, though it's not a story at all, is wildly funny: a solemn lecture on parapsychology which tears the subject to tiny shreds while pretending to defend it. A rather similar item, a debate on SF extracted from a novel by Nikolai V. Tomin, doesn't seem to get anywhere despite Prof. Suvin's best efforts to explain it via footnotes; I had the distinct impression that none of the debaters were listening to each other, but each only to how his own words might sound to some official eavesdropper. Finally, one of the three stories by Anatoliy Dneprov is a funny but minor effort in which a nameless character successfully talks a traffic cop out of giving him a ticket by some optical sophistry.

This leaves four good Soviet stories, one each by Genrikh S. Altov (genuinely poetic) and Romain Yarov, and the other two by the aforementioned Dneprov, all of which are blessed by genuine plots with live characters in them. As one would expect, all of the stories in the book, good and bad, except Lem's "The Patrol," point morals; but this is so common in Western SF too that I didn't find it obtrusive.

Prof. Suvin's long introduction is exceedingly well written and a model of scholarship and interpretation, and even his blurbs are packed with useful information. The book is handsomely designed, and belongs in the library of any serious student of our genre. Necessarily it could not be more than a sampling of its vast subject, but adding it to the two (inferior) Collier anthologies of Soviet SF introduced by Isaac Asimov may give us at least a start toward understanding How The Other Half Thinks.

James Branch Cabell: SOMETHING ABOUT EVE. Ballantine Books, 1970. Paper, 95¢

Here is the next-to-last work of fiction in Cabell's 20-volume "Biography of the Life of Manuel," and also the next-to-last which is a fantasy (see BOOKS, *F&SF*, February 1970). Cabell said that it was the one book of the 20 which he most enjoyed writing, and found easiest to do (perhaps one of these clauses is redundant); but among the fantasies I also find it one of the easiest to fault. It is far and away the bawdiest work Cabell ever produced, as though he were deliberately challenging the Comstockery which suppressed JURGEN for two years, but the bawdry strikes me as forced, which is not true of any other Cabell book; it contains many of the anagrams and other literary games which are buried in his major works, but this time I think they are over-obvious; it is, like all his fantasies, also an allegory, but again one so obvious as not to have

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needed spinning out to novel length; and its main character, a would-be romantic novelist of the mid-19th Century—a descendant of both Jurgen and Dom Manuel—can charitably be described only as a fat-head whose ancestors would have disowned him.

Virtues the book certainly has. It is—needless to say—unfailingly well written; it is often funny; the fantasy is continuously inventive; and it adds new details (for those who care) to the geography of Cabell's dream country, which underlies all but one of his post-Biography novels as well. And one short chapter, "Confusions of the Golden Travel," is a stunning poetic vision in Cabell's highest vein.

Incidentally, a fantasy novella from the Biography, THE WAY OF ECBEN, is now also available in paper in Lin Carter's anthology THE YOUNG MAGICIANS (Ballantine, 1969, 280 pp., 95¢). ECBEN is one of three stories about Dom Manuel's youngest daughter, Ettarre, which together eventually became the Biography volume called THE WITCH WOMAN. Lin incorrectly dates ECBEN 1924, but in fact it was the very last piece of the Biography to appear, in 1929 (though in the chronology of the overall story, the Ettarre tales fall directly after THE SILVER STALLION); and the version he uses here is a 1948 revision. The Carter omnibus also includes 17 fantasies from other hands, from William Morris to Lin himself—an excellent buy.

Finally, Avon Books is about to reissue its paperback JURGEN, and Ballantine has DOMNEI and THE CREAM OF THE JEST waiting in the wings. For British fans, Tandem Books will be re-issuing FIGURES OF EARTH, THE SILVER STALLION and JURGEN all at once in February 1971. Counting a forthcoming hardback reprint of the non-fiction prologue to the Biography, BEYOND LIFE, from Johnson Reprint Corp., we shall soon have just short of half the Biography back; and there are also two post-Biography books in print.

And it was only five years ago that various respected figures both in our field and in Academe were assuring me that a Cabell revival was a hopeless project.

Sam Moskowitz, ed.: UNDER THE MOONS OF MARS. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970. 433 + xiii pp., boards, $7.95

This massive volume is subtitled "a history and anthology of 'the scientific romance' in the Munsey magazines, 1912-1920," and its fiction content consists of nine long stories or pieces of novels running from page three to page 288 with time out for two- to three-page blurbs for each. Five of the nine are well known, and in-

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deed are still in print elsewhere in various recensions. All nine are terrible turkeys in one way or another, though the Murray Leinster story (complete) shows up pretty well against its competitors, as do the snippets from novels by Edgar Rice Burroughs and George Allen England; but all nine are also of real antiquarian interest.

Pages 289 to 433 are devoted to Moskowitz's 19-part history, which—together with his preface and his blurbs—is by far the best work of his that I have ever seen. Many of his characteristic infelicities are still present; for instance, though Holt's copyreader appears to have paid much closer attention than did the copyreader (if one ever existed) for Moskowitz's volumes for World, some groaning pomposities, sentences so innocent of grammar as to be quite incomprehensible, and approximate or misspelled words have managed to escape onto the page. But except for one long passage of sheer conjecture on pp. 292-3, the text is virtually free of the speculative influence-detecting which used to be Moskowitz's only substitute for criticism; and he appears to have been far more scrupulous about verifying his bibliographic facts than he ever was before (even his implication that some early Cabell was published in *Argosy*—though in fact only Cabell's very first story appeared there, 10 years before 1912—is not a factual error but a consequence of a blurry phrase).*

I hope that he *has* been accurate, for the historical section—whatever one may think of it as SF history—seems to be one of the most valuable records ever compiled of the economics of writing and publishing during the crucial period when the pulps, and other magazines of specialized fiction, were just beginning to emerge. If this is in fact the case, then Sam's own text is far more important as raw material for a study of the writing business as a whole than are his spavined exhibits of what a few writers were turning out in a backwater during the nine years of cultural tragedy centered on World War I.

But checking his facts won't be easy; the book has no index.

Peter Tate: THE THINKING SEAT. Doubleday, 1969. 225 pp., boards, $4.95

This novel strikes so close to home that many readers may not regard it as science fiction at all. The scene is the coast of California in 1973, by which time, Tate proposes, a massive desalination plant has brought millions of gallons of fresh water to the San Jose

**Note on the educational value of SF: After reading the stuff intensively for about 40 years, Sam still thinks that chlorophyll is "manufactured by plants from the sun's rays" (p. 385).*

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area—at the price of wrecking the biology of the shoreline. The change is ppposed only by a group of beach bums called budniks, one of whom leads a raid on the plant; but the raid itself is sabotaged by a more effective leader, the hero of the novel, one Simeon.

Simeon does not use his natural command over lesser mortals to set any more effective action in motion, however. Instead, he does nothing but preach a series of outdoor sermons, using the poisoning of the littoral as a metaphor for the self-pollution of the psyche. Simeon has no new religion to offer; instead, he is attempting to grow one, in himself and in his audience. It has strong affinities with Zen, but since its premises are all out in the open and Simeon is willing, indeed eager, to explain himself as he goes along, it is much less murky and more appealing to the intellect. (Perhaps unintentionally on Mr. Tate's part, the novel has a high didactic value: it is almost a demonstration that there is nothing necessarily anti-intellectual about mysticism.)

The Government cannot believe that Simeon's passivity is real, and sics a CIA agent on him; and for further complication there is a four-sided love story that gets mixed into the counterplotting. The cast of characters is large, and no attempt is made to stick to a single viewpoint; the reader finds out what each character is thinking as soon as he needs to know it. Ordinarily the result of such a fictional approach is chaos, but all of Mr. Tate's characters are so real and so well drawn that he is able to turn a beginner's mistake into a strength. The construction is tight and the climax cataclysmic, on several levels.

The overall effect is that of a Russian panoramic novel told with late 20th-Century terseness. And it *is* science fiction, for without its scientific and engineering content—which Mr. Tate understands thoroughly—it would never have happened at all.

Doubleday has an unpleasant custom of pulping its books (instead of remaindering them) as soon as returns begin to exceed sales, and I'm sinfully late in reporting on this one. However, if you can find a copy, buy it.

—JAMES BLISH

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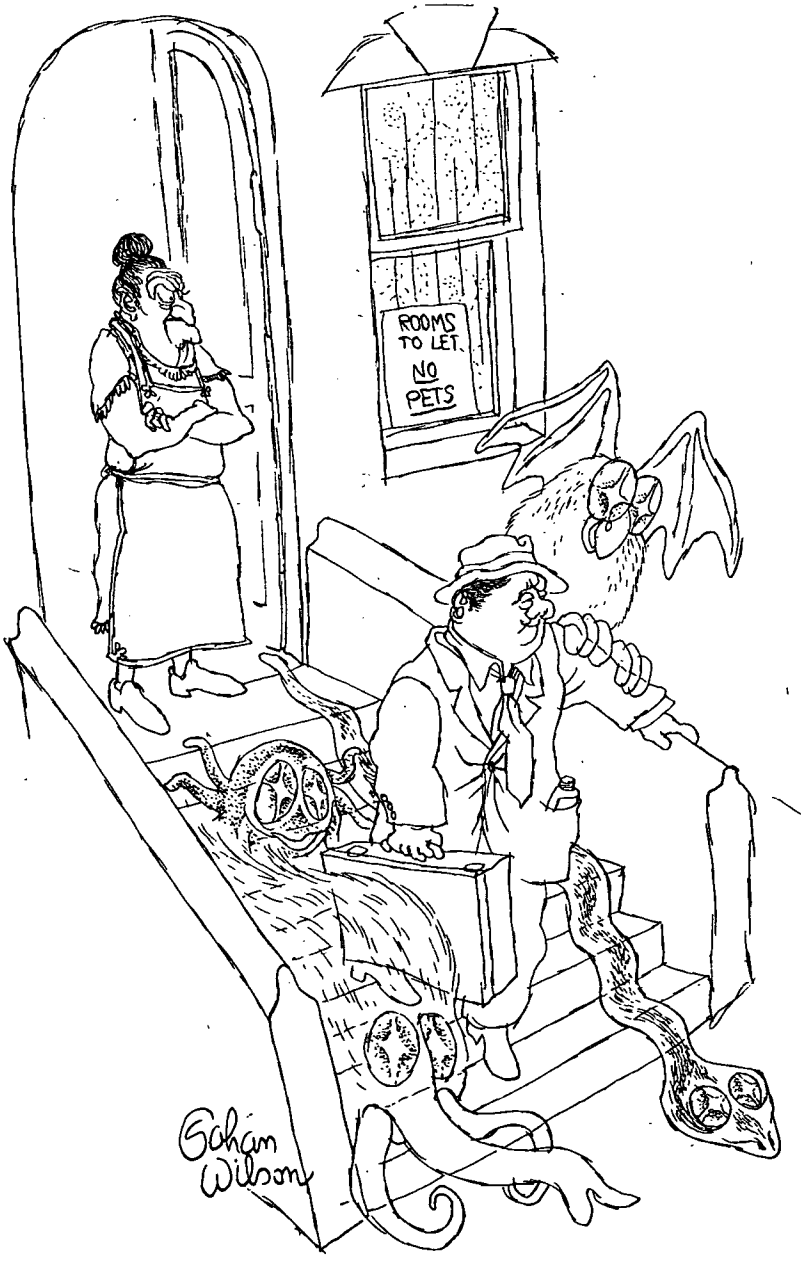

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Michael Gillgannon writes that he is "23 and ugly (distinctive, my wife says); an American emigrant dissatisfied with Canadian beer; lazy; a grad of Kansas University—in journalism; a lover of semicolons; a one-time sports editor for a small town newspaper." His first story for F&SF is about a very ordinary and unhappy man and an extraordinary library. It is a simple story, in the best sense of the word, i.e., clear, uncluttered, and it is ultimately very moving.

MR. KRISKY'S CROSS

by Michael Gillgannon

THE THOUGHT OF MRS. Krisky's femine things—the lacy yellow ones and the red ones and the zebra-striped ones in particular—and the embarrassment he would soon have to suffer when he dumped them out for public display made the laundry bag Mr. Krisky carried seem twice as heavy as it really was. His shoulder drooped and his progress up Lonsdale Avenue to Lucky's Coin-O-Mat was a shambling odyssey.

"It is a cross I must bear," thought Mr. Krisky. He was not a religious man and he did not carry the analogy any further. Mrs. Krisky was, after all, the breadwinner while Mr. Krisky, temporarily and unfortunately, was unemployed. Mrs. Krisky did not look at her husband's plight with enlightened eyes, however. She said, "Edgar, you are a bum. Get a job, bum. Three months and no job. I work, you lead the life of Riley. Is this fair, Edgar? Is this fair?"

Mr. Krisky shifted the bag to his other shoulder and sighed. "Maybe the laundromat will be empty," he thought. But he knew it would be jammed with women, hair rollers a-bristling, who would look at him and say, "There's Krisky, washing his wife's panties while she works. What a bum he is."

There was one thing to be thankful for. The sun shone and the air smelled just fine. Mr. Krisky filled his lungs with it and

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wondered when the government would get around to charging him for its use. "Meters in my nose, maybe, to measure how much I breathe." Mr. Krisky wasn't always unhappy; he had been happy many times during his life—but never for very long. That is why jobs came and went with him, like oil changes for a car. "I get bored," he told Mrs. Krisky. "Who can be happy when he's bored? Who can work when he's bored?"

"I work when I'm bored," she screeched. "Maxine Kremsch works when *she's* bored. *Everybody* works when they're bored. So who are you, you bum, to sit around and get fat and live off everybody? Who are you?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Sure, I know, I know. I'll look again tomorrow. So take your hooks out of me."

But Mr. Krisky didn't look very hard. Tomorrow came and went many times, and his wife became silent and merely stared at him reproachfully when she came home from work. And now he was walking up Lonsdale Avenue with her underwear in a sack, wishing a truck would hit him and let him die with a trace of his dignity intact. But, no, the bag would probably rip, and they would find him dead under a mountain of brassieres and laugh in their throats at his ultimate embarrassment.

Mr. Krisky was a block from the laundromat when he stopped in front of a sign he had somehow missed seeing on his earlier walks. It was bolted in place just below the street signs for 14th and Lonsdale, and spelled out LIBRARY in big, green capital letters. "Just the thing for me," he thought. "My brain is getting stale. To improve it is a good thing." He thought also of the reprieve it would give him from the cackling hens at the laundromat, and gratefully he took the path of least resistance. Miraculously, his burden grew lighter.

Many years had aged and died since Mr. Krisky had last visited a library, but he remembered liking the experience because it was quiet and cool and there were plenty of chairs. He was no great reader, but he supposed that this place would have picture magazines and that he would be left alone. He might even find a book to take home to wave in Mrs. Krisky's face. "See, old bitch," he would say, "I'm not so dumb. I improve my mind with books while you fritter away your dull life."

The building was two blocks down 14th Street. It said "Centennial Library" in metal letters on the outside. Mr. Krisky unshouldered the laundry bag and walked in.

The most beautiful woman he had ever seen sat at a desk near the entrance, writing something on a card. A nameplate on the

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desk advertised her as Miss Love. Mr. Krisky tried to take his hat off out of respect for her femininity, but since he wasn't wearing a hat, he merely stood there with the laundry bag resting on his foot and made a weak, choked sound. Miss Love looked up and said hello with such an intonation that Mr. Krisky knew she wanted to help him in every possible way.

Miss Love had to say hello one more time before words sputtered out of Mr. Krisky to form, as if by chance, a sentence. "I want to see your library."

"Of course, Mr. . ."

"Edgar Balthazar Krisky, age thirty, height . . ."

"That's fine, Mr. Krisky." She picked up the telephone and talked to it. "Mr. Krisky to see the library," she said.

In a very few seconds a brown-haired angular woman of perhaps 175 pounds, who was taller than Mr. Krisky's five feet eleven inches, turned the corner and bore down on him and Miss Love like a Coast Guard cutter pursuing a fishing boat. She extended her hand vigorously. "Mr. Krisky, I am Mrs. Tork. Would you like to come with me, please?"

Mr. Krisky was not so sure that he did. However, there didn't seem to be any alternatives. He took a last look at Miss Love, who had already resumed her work.

"Why don't you leave your bag by the desk, Mr. Krisky? said Mrs. Tork. He did. He propped it against the side, then followed Mrs. Tork, who was already moving away. He walked fast to catch up.

She led him into a big white room with a skylight. Books were shelved against the walls and in rows on the floor.

"This is the bookroom," Mrs. Tork said. Mr. Krisky nodded his head. It was a bookroom all right, but he could only see four people shuffling about, all of them frowning thoughtfully.

"Books, but no people," said Mr. Krisky.

"Most of them are in other parts of the building. These people are picking their colors and sizes."

"I see," said Mr. Krisky, in an I-don't-see tone of voice. He did see that all the books were colored, either black, red, green, blue, or yellow, and that they were of various sizes, but it was news to him that people selected books that way, without regard to author and title. It seemed odd, but he figured it was simply another instance of progress passing him by to leave him choking in its dust.

"Are the picture magazines in another part, too?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Krisky. No magazines here." Mrs. Tork looked at him reprovingly, then smiled, showing buck teeth that glistened in the fluorescent light. "We are beyond that."

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Mr. Krisky said, "Ah," to indicate that he shared her little joke although he really didn't know what she was talking about. His hand shot out at random, selecting a green book from a nearby shelf. "There isn't any printing on the outside," he said.

"No, there isn't any printing on the outside," said Mrs. Tork.

Mr. Krisky opened the book and flipped through it. "There aren't any words on the inside, either."

"That is quite correct, Mr. Krisky. It is a blank book, a book without words."

Mr. Krisky put back the green book and chose a yellow one. It was smaller than the green book, but its pages were just as blank. "This one doesn't have any words, either."

"Most of them don't, you know. That red one does." She pointed to a slim volume with white ink on the spine. "*My Life and Times,* by Raoul P. Zomar," read Mr. Krisky. "This Zomar fellow, is he a famous writer?"

"What is fame, Mr. Krisky?" Mrs. Tork put her hand on his shoulder in a comradely way. "In his own right, Mr. Zomar is famous. What else matters?"

Mr. Krisky opened Raoul P. Zomar's book. It was filled with handwriting, much of it illegible. It slanted up and down and sometimes spilled into the margins. It plodded at times and raced at times, as if it were trying to catch up with Mr. Zomar's thoughts. He read the first paragraph:

"Hello, I am Raoul P. Zomar, a forty-four-year-old man. I like sex and sauerkraut, in that order, unless it is my wife's sauerkraut or, for the matter of that, my wife! Ha ha. I am a funny man too, if you can believe my friends."

"I think I begin to understand," said Mr. Krisky, looking around at the vast display of colorful books.

"Do you?"

"Your library—it isn't a regular library."

"Certainly not."

"It is a—how do you say it?"

"A do-it-yourself library, Mr. Krisky?"

"A do-it-yourself library. Exactly."

"Very good, Mr. Krisky. Very good indeed." Mrs. Tork's heavily lidded eyes opened wide in admiration. "Follow me now, and I'll show you the rest of the building."

She led him through a hallway lined with portraits of all the vice-presidents of the United States and into another room which was packed with dozens of soundproof cubicles. Each cubicle had a door and on each door was a red light. If the red light was on, someone was inside and was not to be disturbed.

"This is the thinkroom," Mrs. Tork whispered.

"Where people think?"

"That's right. As you can see,

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there are more people here than there were in the bookroom." And she was so right. Fifteen red lights burned in the thinkroom. Fifteen brains in action.

"They are writing their books?" inquired Mr. Krisky.

"Oh, more than that, more than that. They are rewriting their lives, Mr. Krisky! Think of it! Rewriting their lives!" Mrs. Tork looked reverently at an undefined point in space as Mr. Krisky tried to absorb this information.

"How do you mean—'rewriting'?"

"Rewriting. I mean they write down their dreams on paper. If they have had unhappy lives, they can leave out the sad parts and make up whatever they want. The poor become rich; the ugly, beautiful; the lonely, popular; the untalented, skillful. It is a wonderful thing, Mr. Krisky, a wonderful thing. Think of the possibilities!"

Mr. Krisky was getting excited. "You mean nagging wives can be blotted out?"

"Blotted out."

"And bill collectors, they can be put in jail?"

"Put in jail."

"And beautiful women can be made to love me?"

"Love, love, love."

"This can all be done?"

"Yes, all of it."

"Just by writing it down?"

"Ah." Mrs. Tork's buck teeth showed themselves. "Not quite, Mr. Krisky, not quite. Writing the book is the first step—the second step, actually. First you pick your size and color. Then you write your book, as these people are doing." The red lights glowed like beacons. "Then—then you go to the dreamroom, Mr. Krisky."

"The dreamroom?"

"The dreamroom. Through that door." She pointed to a red door on the opposite side of the thinkroom. "The dreamroom is in there. After you write your book you go to the dreamroom, and that's where your words take shape, come to life."

Mr. Krisky was dazzled by the thought of it. "In the dreamroom I can be an emperor?"

"Greater than Charlemagne."

Mr. Krisky stood silently, pondering the curious turn of events that had delivered him from the jaws of Lucky's Coin-O-Mat and brought him to this place of promise. There was a catch. There had to be; there always was. Mrs. Tork read the doubt in his eyes.

"Do you smell a rat, Mr. Krisky? Of course you do!" She was quite jocular about it. "You're thinking of hypnotism, or the dreadful elesdee. But in the dreamroom you merely—dream. That's all. No hallucinations, just dream. It's perfectly safe and everything is controlled by what you write in your book. Your unconscious accepts that as a guide, you see."

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Mr. Krisky wasn't sure if he saw or not.

"Follow me then. A quick peek in the dreamroom will make you a believer." Mr. Krisky followed obediently in her wake and noticed for the first time that the lady was bowlegged as well as being angular and huge.

The dreamroom looked like a combination hotel lobby-reading room-hospital ward. Comfortable-looking vinyl reclining chairs were arranged around the walls and separated by white folding screens. Some of the chairs were occupied by people with books in their laps. They appeared to be reading. Beside every chair was a machine, no larger than a portable typewriter, with three toggle switches and a calibrated dial in front. A wire led out of each machine to a metal headband that was worn by each of the reader/dreamers. The room was very quiet. The only noise was the occasional sound of a page turning.

"They are asleep, Mr. Krisky, even though their eyes are open—even though they are reading their books. Otherwise they aren't aware of what is going on around them."

"The machine makes them sleep?"

"The machine makes them sleep and allows them to read. They supply their own dreams. No nightmares here, Mr. Krisky, because their dreams are determined by what they write."

"But—I am no writer. Letters to my mother sometimes . . . I would rather go to church."

"That's all right, Mr. Krisky. Your unconscious greatly expands what you've written. It takes many dream periods to finish a book, even a short book. Look at it this way, Mr. Krisky: Your book is like a box score in a baseball game. Your dream *is* the baseball game."

He considered the analogy a second. "And my wife, you say she can be blotted out?"

"Whatever you want."

Mr. Krisky thought of Mrs. Krisky, thought of the shrews at the laundromat whom he could electrocute under their hair dryers with the stroke of a pen, thought of Miss Love, dear Miss Love.

"Where do I sign?" he said.

"First you must get a library card, Mr. Krisky. Let's go back to the front and Miss Love will take care of that."

So they left the dreamroom, passed through the thinkroom and the bookroom, and came to Miss Love's front desk.

"Mr. Krisky wants a library card, Miss Love. Will you take care of it please?" She extended her hand again. "Good-bye for now. Pleasant dreams."

Mr. Krisky did not watch her leave. Instead he stared at Miss Love, who looked back at him de-

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murely and said, "Please be seated." Miss Love opened a drawer and withdrew a form.

"Now, Mr. Krisky, what is your first name?"

"Edgar. Edgar Baltahazr Krisky. I am thirty years of age. I live at one-one-three East Seventh Street, and my telephone number is 874-9786. I am 180 pounds in weight."

"And where do you work?"

Mr. Krisky pursed his lips. Always coming with their stupid questions, he thought. Always snooping, prying around.

"It is—confidential," he whispered. "Hush-hush. You know what I mean?"

Miss Love did not know what he meant. "I'm sorry, Mr. Krisky. We must know what your job is. It's in the rules, I'm afraid."

Mr. Krisky's sad eyes told Miss Love his story. Don't ask for something I can't give, they said.

Miss Love fiddled with her pencil. "I understand," she said. "You are—unemployed. Is that right, Mr. Krisky?"

He stared at nothing. His head moved up and down. "It is a cross I must bear."

"They're very strict about that around here," Miss Love said. "They want solid citizens or something. I'm afraid I can't let it go through like this. Unless . . ."

"Unless? What is this unless?"

"Unless you could possibly give me a good character reference?" Her voice was tainted with doubt—understandably, since Mr. Krisky did not appear to be the type who hobnobbed with bank presidents or other pillars of the community. Mr. Krisky, in fact, did not know a single person of unsullied reputation. The few friends he had were as deep in debt as he was himself and were not likely to make anyone's social register for a long, long time.

Mr. Krisky looked despondently at the laundry bag. Charlemagne, he thought. King Arthur. Franklin Roosevelt.

He stood to leave. He felt his bones creak. But as he bent to pick up his burden, an idea flashed in his head, stimulated by the thought of the laundromat and Mrs. Krisky's undies.

"I am no pipsqueak!" he thundered, and the conviction of his statement echoed off the walls. He smiled for the first time that day.

Miss Love said, "I beg your pardon?"

"I am a writer. Put that down on your card. I am a writer and I work *here*. Put that down. I work for myself. Writing. Put it down. Now I am going to pick out my book." He turned sharply and walked toward the bookroom. Had he muscles, they would have rippled.

As it happened, Mr. Krisky chose a fat, green book. Green, because it was his favorite color; fat, because he was full of dreams.◀

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Here is an intriguing story about a confrontation between a few Earthmen and the being that has created most of the life on Earth. Its author is a young (25) free lancer who was born in Tyrol, Austria, and grew up in England, New York and Miami. He now lives in Binghamton, N. Y., where he writes (about 12 sf sales so far) and also teaches a course in science fiction at the State University of New York.

HEATHEN GOD

by George Zebrowski

". . . every heathen deity has its place in the flow of existence."

THE ISOLATION STATION AND preserve for alien flora and fauna on Antares IV had only one prisoner, a three-foot-tall gnome-like biped with skin like creased leather and eyes like great glass globes. His hair was silky white and reached down to his shoulders, and he usually went about the great natural park naked. He lived in a small white cell located in one of the huge block-like administration modules. There was a small bed in the cell, and a small doorway which led out to the park. A hundred feet away from the door there was a small pool, one of many scattered throughout the park. It reflected the deep-blue color of the sky.

The gnome was very old, but no one had yet determined quite how old. And there seemed to be no way to find out. The gnome himself had never volunteered any information about his past. In the one hundred years of his imprisonment he had never asked the caretaker for anything. It was rumored among the small staff of Earthmen and humanoids that the gnome was mad. Generally they avoided him. Sometimes they would watch his small figure standing under the deep-blue sky, looking up at the giant disk of An-

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tares hanging blood red on the horizon, just above the well-pruned trees of the park, and they would wonder what he might be thinking.

The majority of Earthmen spread over twelve star systems did not even know of the gnome's existence, much less his importance. A few knew, but they were mostly scholarly and political figures, and a few theologians. The most important fact about the alien was that sometime in the remote past he had been responsible for the construction of the solar system and the emergence of intelligent life on earth.

The secret had been well kept for over a century.

In the one hundred and fourth year of the alien's captivity two men set out for Antares to visit him. The first man's motives were practical: the toppling of an old regime; the other man's goal was to ask questions. The first man's political enemies had helped him undertake this journey, seeing that it would give them the chance to destroy him. The importance of gaining definitive information about the alien was in itself enough reason to send a mission, but combined with what they knew about the motives of the man they feared, this mission would provide for them the perfect occasion to resolve both matters at the same time. In any case, the second man would bring back anything of value that they might learn about the gnome.

Everything had been planned down to the last detail. The first ship carrying the two unsuspecting men was almost ready to come out of hyperspace near Antares. Two hours behind it in the warp was a military vessel—a small troop ship. As the first vessel came out of nothingness into the brilliance of the great star, the commander of the small force ship opened his sealed orders.

As he came down the shuttle ramp with his two companions, Father Louis Chavez tried to mentally prepare himself for what he would find here. It was still difficult to believe what his superiors had told him about the alien who was a prisoner here. The morning air of Antares IV was fresh, and the immediate impression was one of stepping out into a warm botanical garden. At his left Sister Guinivere carried his small attaché case. On his right walked Benedict Compton, linguist, cultural anthropologist, and as everyone took for granted, eventual candidate for first secretary of Earth's Northern Hemisphere. Compton was potentially a religious man, but the kind who always demanded an advance guarantee before committing himself to anything. Chavez felt suspicious of him; in fact he felt wary about this entire visit to Antares IV.

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On earth the religio-philosophic system was a blend of evolutionary Chardinism and Christianity, an imposing intellectual structure that had been dominant for some two hundred years now. The political structure based its legitimacy and continuing policies on it. Compton, from what he had learned, had frightened some high authorities with the claim that the gnome creature here on Antares IV was a potential threat to the beliefs of mankind. This, combined with what was already known about the alien's past, was seemingly enough to send this fact-finding mission. Only a few men knew about it, and Chavez remembered the fear he had sensed in them when he had been briefed. Their greatest fear was that somehow the gnome's history would become public knowledge. Compton, despite his motives, had found a few more political friends. But Chavez suspected that Compton wanted power not for himself, but to do something about the quality of life on earth. He was sure the man was sincere. How little of the thought in our official faith filters out into actual policy, Chavez thought. And what would the government do if an unorganized faith—a heresy in the old sense—were to result from this meeting between Compton and the alien? Then he remembered how Compton had rushed this whole visit. He wondered just how far a man like Compton would go to have his way in the world.

Antares was huge on the horizon, a massive red disk against a deep blue sky. A slight breeze waved the trees around the landing square. The pathway which started at the north corner led to three block-like administration buildings set on a neat lawn and surrounded by flowering shrubs and fruit-bearing trees. The buildings were a bright-white color. The walk was pleasant.

Rufus Kade, the caretaker, met them at the front entrance to the main building. He showed them into the comfortable reception room. He was a tall, thin botanist, who had taken the administrative post because it gave him the opportunity to be near exotic plants. Some of the flora came from worlds as much as one hundred light-years away from Antares. After the introductions were over, Kade took the party to the enclosed garden which had a pool in its center, and where the gnome spent most of his time.

"Do you ever talk with him, Mr. Kade?" Father Chavez asked. The caretaker shook his head. "No," he said. "And now I hope you will all excuse me, I have work to do." He left them at the entrance to the garden path.

Compton turned to Father Chavez and said, "You are lucky, you're the only representative of

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any church ever to get a chance to meet what might be the central deity of that church." He smiled. "But I feel sorry for you—for whatever he is, he will not be what you expect, and most certainly he will not be what you want him to be."

"Let's wait and see," Chavez said. "I'm not a credulous man."

"You know, Chavez," Compton said in a more serious mood, "they let me come here too easily. What I mean is they took my word for the danger involved with little or no question."

"Should they have not taken your word? You are an important man. You sound as if you didn't quite tell them everything."

They walked into the garden. On either side of them the plants were luxurious, with huge green leaves and strange varicolored flowers. The air was filled with rich scents, and the earth gave the sensation of being very moist and loosely packed. They came into the open area surrounding the pool. Sister Guinivere stood between the two men as they looked at the scene. The water was still, and the disk of Antares was high enough now in the morning sky to be reflected in it.

The gnome stood on the far side, watching them as they approached, as if he expected them at any moment to break into some words of greeting. Father Chavez knew that they would appear as giants next to the small figure. It would be awkward standing before a member of a race a million years older than mankind and towering over him. It would be aesthetically banal, Chavez thought.

As they came to the other side of the pool Compton said, "Let me start the conversation, Father."

"If you wish," Chavez said. *Why am I afraid, and what does it matter who starts the conversation, he thought.*

Compton walked up to the standing gnome and sat down cross-legged in front of him. It was a diplomatic gesture. Father Chavez felt relieved and followed the example, motioning Sister Guinivere to do the same. They all looked at the small alien.

His eyes were deep set and large; his hair was white, thin and reached down to his shoulders. He had held his hands behind his back when they had approached, but now they were together in front of him. His shoulders were narrow and his arms were thin. He wore a one-piece coverall with short sleeves.

Chavez hoped they would be able to talk to him easily. The gnome looked at each of them in turn. After a few minutes of silence it became obvious that he expected them to start the conversation.

"My name is Benedict Compton," Compton said, "and this is

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Father Chavez and Sister Guinivere, his secretary. We came here to ask you about your past, because it concerns us."

Slowly the gnome nodded his head, but he did not sit with them. There was more silence. Compton gave Chavez a questioning look.

"Could you tell us who you are?" Chavez asked. The gnome moved his head sharply to look at him. It's almost as if I interrupted him at something. Chavez thought. There was a sad look on the face now, as if in that one moment he had understood everything—why they were here and the part he would have to play.

Chavez felt his stomach grow tense. He felt as if he were being carefully examined. Next to him Compton was playing with a blade of grass. Sister Guinivere sat with her hands folded in her lap. Briefly he recalled the facts he knew about the alien—facts which only a few Earthmen had been given access to over the last century. Facts which demanded that some sort of official attitude be taken.

The best-kept secret of the past century was the fact that this small creature had initiated the events which led to the emergence of intelligent life on Earth. In the far past he had harnessed his powers of imagination to a vast machine, which had been built for another purpose, and had used it to create most of the life on Earth. He had been caught at his experiments in cosmology, and exiled. Long before men had gone out to the stars he had been a wanderer in the galaxy, but in recent years he had been handed over to Earth authorities to keep at this extraterrestrial preserve. Apparently his people still feared his madness. This was all they had ever revealed to the few Earthmen who took charge of the matter.

It was conjectured that the gnome's race was highly isolationist; the gnome was the only member of it that had ever been seen by Earthmen. The opinion was also held that his culture feared contact with other intelligent life, and especially with this illegitimate creation. Of the few who knew about the case, only one or two had ever expressed any disbelief. It was after all, Chavez thought, enough to make any man uneasy. It seemed safer to ignore the matter most of the time.

Since that one contact with Earth, the gnome's race had never come back for him and had never offered further explanations. A century ago they had simply left him in Earth orbit, in a small vessel of undeniably superior workmanship. A recorded message gave all the information they had wanted to reveal. Their home world had never been found, and the gnome had remained silent.

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Benedict Compton had set up this meeting, and Chavez had been briefed by his superiors and instructed to go along as an observer.

Chavez remembered how the information had at first shaken and then puzzled him. The tension in his stomach grew worse. He wondered about Compton's motives, but he had not dared to question them openly. On Earth many scientists prized the alien as the only contact with a truly advanced culture, and he knew that more than one young student would do anything to unlock the secrets that must surely exist in the brain of the small being now standing in front of him. He felt sure that Compton was hoping for some such thing.

Suddenly the small figure took a step back from them. A small breeze waved his long white hair. He stopped and his small, gnarly body took on a strange stature; his face was grief stricken and his low voice was sad. It wavered as he spoke to them. "I made you to love each other, and through yourselves, me. I needed that love. No one can know how much I needed it, but it had to be freely given, so I had to permit the possibility of it being withheld. There was no other way, and there still is not."

Chavez looked at Compton for a reaction. The big man sat very still. Sister Guinivere was looking down at the grass in front of her feet. Chavez felt a stirring of fear and panic in his insides. It felt as if the alien was speaking only to him—as if *he* could relieve the thirst that lived behind those deep-set eyes in that small head.

He felt the other's need. He felt the deprivation that was visible on that face, and he felt that at any moment he would feel the awesome rage that would spill out onto them. This then, he thought, is the madness that his race had spoken about. All the power had been stripped from this being, and now he is a beggar.

Instead of rage there was sadness. It was oppressive. It hung in the air around them. What was Compton trying to uncover here? How could all this benefit anyone? Chavez noticed that his left hand was shaking, and he gripped it with the other hand.

The gnome raised his right hand and spoke again. *Dear God, help me, Chavez prayed. Help me to see this clearly.* "I fled from the hive mind which my race was working toward," the gnome said in a louder voice than before. "They have achieved it. They are one entity now. What you see in this dwarfed body are only the essentials of myself—the feelings mostly—they wait for the day when the love in my children comes to fruition and they will unite, thus recreating my former self—which is now in them. Then I will leave my prison and return

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to them to become the completion of myself. This body will die then. My longing for that time is without limit, and I will make another history like this one and see it through. Each time I will be the completion of a species and its moving spirit. And again they will give birth to me. Without this I am nothing."

There was a loud thunderclap overhead, the unmistakable sound of a shuttle coming through the atmosphere. But it's too early for the starship shuttle to be coming back for them, Chavez thought. Compton jumped up and turned to look toward the administration buildings. Chavez noticed that the gnome was looking at him. *Do your people worship a supreme being? Chavez thought the question. Do they have the idea of such a being? Surely you know the meaning of such a being?*

I don't know any such thing, the thought spoke clearly in his head. *Do you know him?*

"It's a shuttle craft," Compton said. "Someone's coming to join us."

Chavez got to his feet and went over to Compton. Sister Guinivere struggled to her feet and joined them. "What is it?" she asked.

"I—I don't know who it could be," Compton said. Chavez noticed the lack of confidence in the other's voice. Behind them the gnome stood perfectly still, unaffected by the interruption.

"They've landed by now," Compton said. "It could only be one thing, Father—they've found out my plans for the gnome." Compton came up to him and spoke in a low voice. "Father, this is the only way to get a change on earth—yes, it's what you think, a cult, with me as its head, but the cause is just. Join me now, Father!"

Then it's true, Chavez thought. He's planning to by-pass the lawful candidacy. Then why did they let him come here?

There was a rustling sound in the trees and shrubs around the pool area. Suddenly they were surrounded by armed men. Twenty figures in full battle gear had stepped out from the trees and garden shrubs. They stood perfectly still, waiting.

Antares was directly overhead now, a dark-red circle of light covering twenty percent of the blue dome that was the sky. Noontime.

Compton's voice shook as he shouted, "What is *this*? Who the devil are you!"

A tall man immediately on the other side of the pool from them appeared to be the commanding officer. He wore no gear and there were no weapons in his hands. Instead he held a small piece of paper which he had just taken out of a sealed envelope.

"Stand away, Father, and you too, Sister!" the officer shouted. "This does not concern you."

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Then he looked down at the paper in his hand and read: "Benedict Compton, you have been charged with conspiracy to overthrow the government of the Northern Hemisphere on Earth by unlawful means, and you have been tried and convicted by the high court of North America for this crime. The crime involves the use of an alien being as your co-conspirator to initiate a religious controversy through a personally financed campaign which would result in your becoming the leader of a subversive cult, whose aim would be to seize power through a carefully prepared *hoax*. You and your co-conspirator are being eliminated because you are both enemies of the state." The officer folded the paper and put it back in its envelope and placed it in his tunic.

Chavez noticed that Sister Guinivere was at his side, and he could tell that she was afraid. Compton turned to Chavez.

"Father, protect the gnome, whatever he is. Use what authority you have. They won't touch you."

"The execution order is signed by Secretary Alcibiad herself!" the tall officer shouted.

Chavez was silent.

"Father, please!" Compton pleaded. "You can't let this happen." Chavez heard the words, but he was numb with surprise. The words had transfixed him as effectively as any spear. He couldn't move, he couldn't think. Sister Guinivere held his arm.

Suddenly Compton was moving toward the gnome.

"Shoot!"

The lasers reached out like tongues.

The little figure fell. And the thought went out from him in one last effort, reaching light-years into space. *I loved you. You did not love me, or each other.* They all heard the thought, and it stopped them momentarily, Compton was still standing, but his right arm was gone, and he was bleeding noisily onto the grass.

"Shoot!" the order went out again.

Again the lasers lashed out. Compton fell on his back, a few yards from the gnome. Sister Guinivere fell to the grass on her knees, sobbing. She began to wail. The soldiers began to retreat back to their shuttle craft. Father Chavez sat down on the ground. He didn't know what to do. He looked at the two bodies. There was smoke coming from Compton's clothing. The gnome's hair was aflame.

The tall officer now stood alone on the other side of the pool. Chavez knew that his orders had probably been sealed, and he only now felt their full force. After a few moments the tall officer turned and went after his men.

The alien knew this would happen, Chavez thought. He knew,

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and that was why he told us everything.

When the great disk of Antares was forty-five degrees above the horizon, Rufus Kade came out to them. He put the two bodies in plastic specimen bags. Sister Guinivere was calm now and was holding Father Chavez's hand. They both stood up when Kade was finished with the bodies.

"They had an official pass from way up," Kade said. "I even checked back on it."

He walked slowly with them to the administration building. The shuttle to the starship was ready.

Thirty hours out from Antares Father Chavez sat alone in his small cabin looking at the small monitor which showed him where he had been. Soon now the brilliance of the stars would be replaced by the dull emptiness of hyperspace. Antares was a small red disk on the screen.

Momentarily Chavez resented the fact that he had been a creation to the gnome. In any case the alien had not been God. His future importance would be no greater than that of Christ—probably less. He had been only an architect, a mere shaper of materials which had existed long before even his great race had come into being. But still—was he not closer to God than any *man* had ever been? Or would be?

The completion for which the gnome had made man would never take place now. The point of mankind's existence as he had made it was gone. And the alien had not known God. If there was such a being, a greatest possible being, he now seemed hopelessly remote . . .

O Lord, I pray for a sign! Chavez thought.

But he heard only his thoughts and nothing from the being who would surely have answered in a case like this. And he had stood by while they killed the gnome there in the garden by the pool side, on that planet circling the red star whose diameter was greater than the orbit of Mars. Despite all his reasoning now, Chavez knew that he had stood back while they killed that part of the small creature which had loved humanity.

But what had he said? The *rest* of the gnome's being *was* humanity, and it still existed; except that now it would never be reunited with him. *"Do not fear,"* the holy Antony had said three thousand years ago, *"this goodness as a thing impossible, nor its pursuit as something alien, set a great way off: it hangeth on our own arbitrament. For the sake of the Greek learning men go overseas . . . but the city of God is everywhere . . . the kingdom of God is within. The goodness that is in us only asks the human mind.* What we can do for ourselves, Chavez

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thought, that's all that is ours now: goals.

He took a deep breath as the starship slipped into the nothingness of hyperspace. He felt the burden of the political power which he now carried as a witness to the alien's murder, and he knew that Compton's life had not been for nothing. He would have to hide his intentions carefully, but he knew what he would have to do.

In time, he hoped anew, we may still give birth to the semblance of godhood that lives on in mankind, on that small world which circles a yellow sun.

AUTHOR'S AFTERWORD:

There are certain emotional-psychological connotations which surround theological concepts, especially those which seem to stick to the concept of godhood and god's possible relation to his creatures. These connotations of love and hate still manage to elicit responses from people who are otherwise agnostics or atheists. It is these uneasy shadows which I wanted to present in this story, but without committing either myself or my gentle, tolerant reader to any doctrines. I wanted to take a fresh dramatic look at certain religious concepts, like god, and try to see if a belief in a greatest possible being could be undermined by the kind of situation envisaged in the story. I think it can be shown that no science fictional situation can ever undermine a religious belief, even if all the events in this story were to take place. Most sf authors treat religious concepts somewhat naively, eg., we can make life in the lab, therefore a belief in god becomes incredible; evil exists, therefore god cannot exist; or god is some kind of alien, and religious faith collapses. One thing emerges clearly: the concept of God—*the idea of a greatest possible being—is independent for purely logical reasons of any empirical "test" for existence that can be carried out* within *the universe. In the story, God becomes a remote figure. However, if the* concept *makes sense, then it carries within itself the implication of existence, because a greatest possible being must, again for purely conceptual-logical reasons, have all the qualities up to and including necessary existence. If you cannot think of the greatest possible being as existing, then you are not thinking about him at all, but about some lesser deity like the gnome-alien of the story.*

In any event, all this is legitimate material for a speculative sf story, and I present it only as such. I would like to thank Barry Malzberg, whom I have never met, for starting my thoughts going for this story. And thanks to Pamela Sargent for her gentle criticism.

GZ

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FILMS

Baird Searles

A PLENTITUDE OF FILMS ON which to report this time around. No great ones, but some which are certainly worth seeing. The most interesting, and not only because it comes from a true work of science fiction, is **No Blade of Grass** (MGM), based, of course, on John Christopher's novel of over a decade ago. One of that period's fine British end-of-civilization epics, this depiction of a world reduced to starvation and chaos by a virus that kills all cereal grasses seemed very speculative then. It is a good deal closer to home now, not only in its ecological aspects, but in the rapid disintegration of civilized behavior. A truly frightening moment of the film comes when a radio announcer says, "If the country only shows the spirit of The Battle of Britain we can pull through," and one realizes that few countries in the West could marshal that kind of *esprit* to meet any one of several disasters hanging over our heads. The film, directed by Cornel Wilde, is melodramatic and fairly explicit in sex and violence, but these aspects are certainly justified given the anarchistic circumstances of the plot. It is such a strong plot that the somewhat pretentious use of flash-forwards and backs seems overdone; the narrative consists simply of the trek of an English family from riot-torn London through a ravaged countryside and the dangers, primarily human, that they encounter. Performances vary from adequate to competent, being mostly English stiff upper lip, but the production, photography and writing bring it off.

Taste the Blood of Dracula (Warner Bros.-7 Arts), one of the more tasteful titles of the year, is the latest Christopher Lee bloodletting from Hammer Films. I'm afraid the series is sliding into decadence; all logic and consistency have disappeared, and there are more loose ends than a plate of spaghetti in this account of the Count resuscitated by three respectable gentlemen in search of underground thrills, Victorian style. He does them in through their grown children, all romantically involved with each other, and nincompoops of the first water. It ends ludicrously in the familiar ruined church, with Dracula tossing old organ pipes at our hero. Production and some effects are good, as always with Hammer, but maybe some of that money should go into better writers; there is no reason why a horror film can't be bloody and thrilling enough to bring in the masses while still retaining some logic and subtlety. Skip this one unless

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you're a completist.

A step up is the latest Vincent Price thingie, **Cry of the Banshee** (American-International). Taking place somewhere in the British isles in (I would guess) the 16th century, it tells of a rural witch cult pitted against the local gentry, headed by Price, who is very big on law and order. The contemporary message is right there, and if you didn't get it, it's rubbed in by the cast list at the end, divided into "The Witches" and "The Establishment." A bit short on logic and plot structure, but there are several good things going here. One is a good sense of period. Another is a better-than-usual idea of the "old religion" and its retention by the peasantry, maybe the first time this particular reality of historical witchcraft has been used in a film. In other words, an intelligent, if not too coherent script that also has the virtue of not taking the usual directions. Count another plus in the portrayal of Ooona, leader of the witches, by the fabulous star of the 30's, Elisabeth Bergner, who has real presence.

Trog (Warner Bros.-7 Arts) is to be avoided even if you *are* a completist. A revived "troglodyte" (in the film maker's minds, a fancy term for cave man, apparently) thaws out from his cold-sleep glacier just in time to meet a group of spelunkers in an English cave. He is captured, and most of the film is spent in a running battle between the head of the local research center, who wants to preserve and educate him, and the town fundamentalist, who wants him destroyed. This could have been another *Jerry is a Man*, but the whole thing is so scientifically, cinematically, and dramatically ludicrous that it's a lost cause. I saw it at a pre-release screening; the audience, usually professionally bored and blasé at such events, was in stitches from the beginning. Joan Crawford does her professional best as the head of the research center, but Mildred Pierce meets Neanderthal man and loses.

Book Note . . . John Baxter's *Science Fiction in the Cinema* (Paperback Library) is a must for those that care about the field. Mr. Baxter knows science fiction *and* the cinema; the book is readable, informative, and invaluable for Late Show reference.

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Doris Buck's new story—a fresh treatment of the alternate universe theme—begins with a twentieth century engineer who finds himself in a universe similar to colonial America. It then goes in far from the usual directions.

SPRING AND THE GREEN-EYED GIRL

by Doris Pitkin Buck

TWAD'S GORGE ROSE SLIGHTLY. The young engineer listened to his family, in conclave for the annual reunion, do Greek chorus stuff about their own excellence. They genuflected in spirit before the time-hallowed motto: *Prudence and Probity*. He told himself to avoid overreacting. He must still be worn out after his last, most strenuous job. Hadn't he usually found these gatherings amusing?

His foot jerked. Momentarily he felt as if someone had stuck a knife in it. Several members of the family got keyed up in an odd way if it thundered. He glanced out the window, but the darkening April held no hint of storm that evening. His foot started to jerk again. By an effort he held it rigid.

He glanced about at cousins, cousins once removed, uncles with greats—all simmering in their own complacency. Suppose he rasped at them, "Fine lot you are, cushioning yourselves on money that rolled to you out of the past. Could any of you men turn an honest penny—independently? Even a dishonest one?" For a moment he meant to try this, to watch its effect. He controlled the impulse as he'd controlled his foot.

"Get yourself some punch, Twad."

Why does that infantile corruption of my name have to stick, damn it?

He must get away. He saw that. But no need to make a production of it. He glanced about hunting for Great-Aunt Mathilde, always easy to spot with her brooch of enormous emeralds, a cluster as green as sea water. As a group broke up he saw them. He shivered. A plunge into waves would have made him no colder.

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He slipped over to the old lady and offered, "Want me to go upstairs and bring you your shawl?"

"The darling boy!" She laid fingers as fleshless as a canary's foot on his arm. "Back from his Pan-Am Highway, from engineering in Colombia—Where do you get all your energy, Twad? And this boy still pampers his favorite aunt. Of course I want my shawl. It's in the closet four steps in front of you after the top of the stairs."

"OK."

"You got the directions straight, Twad? Sure you have them?"

"Quite sure." Characteristically his great-aunt, he thought, ignored the time her little Twad made his way alone through hundreds of miles of jungle. For her he was still five. He repeated for her benefit, "Up the stairs and four steps straight in front of me." He tried to smile indulgently as he walked away.

Were the stair treads moving erratically, missing spaces, flying out at angles, or was something the matter with him? He grasped the rail tightly. It slithered like a snake away from his fingers. And he hadn't even taken a drop of their punch, perhaps because somebody called him Twad.

The stair shot him forward like a speeded-up escalator. He was on the second floor. With relief he noted he had no least touch of dizziness.

He started for the closet that was four steps straight in front of him. The directions had been given to him twice only seconds ago. But the wall before him was neatly papered for yards without a sign of a break. A mental jaggedness, a discontinuity, gave him a twinge sharp as a physical headache.

In a moment he'd collected his wits. His aunt was nearly eighty, certainly far from senility, but she probably had brief, fuzzy interludes. He made himself visualize the hall as he'd known it in his childhood. His mind placed the door, sharp and clear, where Aunt Mathilde had described it. His imagination could see it as distinctly as if it were there. Only it wasn't.

Could a recollection be so specific—and all wrong? His breath came with a sucked-in sound. He spun on his heel and with relief he saw the door, well-made and substantial, quite as he remembered except that it was four steps behind the post. He sauntered back and pulled it open.

No closet. Instead a passageway floored with random-width planks, waxed and immaculate. The opposite end was closed off by a second door, this one with wrought-iron hinges that formed H and L. H . . . L . . . Holy Lord, the name for that Colonial type of ironware. The young man was more startled than he felt a right to be. He had

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no idea any part of the house was that old. It wasn't. He felt sure it wasn't. Somebody must have been having a go at fake restoration.

Unimportant. What mattered was the muted sound on the other side of those hinges. Evidently he was only yards from a secret conversation, not a hissing like a whisper, rather words pitched so low that the sound let alone the sense would carry no distance.

Hypotheses rushed through his mind. Parties drew thieves who counted on babble to camouflage their own noise. Boys were good at climbing through second-story windows. Inside jobs might be pulled. Even a guest—

By now Twad realized he heard only one person speaking. It was his clear duty to find out what went on. He tiptoed to the door, pushing it lightly. It stayed tight shut. Was boldness the best policy? Fling the door open and dash in? But if the mutterer were armed? And was he even sure the speaker was a thief? Someone might have slipped away from the family before he did.

By the light of a hall candle on a small stand he studied the door. Paneled. In one panel, light—a thin gold circle. Must be a knot in the wood, and loose.

Twad felt with his nail. He worked patiently. Presently he pulled the knot out as neatly as a waiter uncorks a bottle. He had made a tiny grating noise, but the crackle of a fire in the room before him masked it.

He stared. His instinctive reaction was to muffle a what-in-hell. For two men, one a Caribbean version of Captain Kidd, faced each other across a table glittering with gem-studded necklaces fit for a Marie Antoinette, with rings, with chains of tarnishing silver. Pearls had been mounded into a small heap. One—immense, baroque—shimmered on the palm of the prosperous man who was speaking.

That man eyed it greedily, his intensity of emotion almost revolting. The expression was blotted out in an instant. The face froze into probity above the ruffled cravat fresh from the laundry, the flared brown coat of serviceable material, the knee-length breeches —a study in respectability. A man to talk to a banker, a cleric, a representative in some provincial house of burgesses.

The fellow opposite was filthy from his hair to a shirt cascading eighteenth-century lace. Its sleeves were far too short for the wearer. One big gold earring dangled from a tanned ear. The face under a three-cornered hat was both brutal and naive.

Twad told himself he couldn't be seeing this. He watched the pirate fish something from the wrinkles of a still splendid scarlet sash. The object had been folded up in a rag. The man's heavy fin-

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gers pulled the rag off and laid on the table a cluster of emeralds set in gold.

No! No! If the engineer had been less in control of himself, he would have shouted at the stones glittering in their familiar pattern. He stood shivering, the coldness of seawater pouring through him.

The neat man shoved the brooch back at the pirate, for one moment studying the massive face. The pirate looked only at the brooch. Piggish eyes gleamed slimily. The pirate never saw.

"Take back your glass trumpery, my man." The brooch was dismissed. "Now these pearls, I'll keep all of them. Keep. All. Understand?" Fattish hands with tended nails swept the pearls together. From a drawer in the table, the middle-aged man produced a chamois bag and put the gems in carefully. "These should get a good price or my name's not Deacon Ora Bradstreet."

Some understanding lightened the pirate's face. He stretched out his hand, palm up.

"Not so fast." Ora Bradstreet shook his head with emphasis. "Get money . . . to you . . . through friends. Our usual good friends," he remarked swiftly to himself. Then, "Where'll you be?"

The pirate rumbled in his throat. An incomprehensible mutter.

The deacon leaned toward him, patience incarnate. "New York?" he queried, separating the two words till they sounded like a child learning to read as he said them again and then again.

Finally the dark head shook vigorously.

"Phil-a-del-phia?"

The brow opposite him furrowed, trying to follow the strange language.

"Charleston?"

At last the response came, eyes lighting, head nodding with such vigor that the gold earring almost bounced against the brown neck.

"Good, trust me to get the best price. I'll have to send them to London by a man I trust. Nobody from here. Prudence." He looked the other straight in the eye. "You hardly understand a word of this, and I know it. Your brother was easier to deal with and you put me in mind of him. So I talk as if you had a head for business. I'm a fair man to deal with. I'll take my twenty-five percent, not a farthing more." He gave an oily smile.

The pirate continued to sit with his hand outstretched. The deacon saw some pay was immediately necessary. He took a pouch from his pocket and drew out a couple of sovereigns. He dropped them in the pirate's open hand, his smile quite jovial. "More. Much more. Charleston."

"Now this," his fingers tightened on a ring with a diamond, "must be old, someone's heirloom. Unfashionable today."

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The engineer saw that the deacon could tell his pirate was not following, but the little man with the starched cravat trusted to gestures, to tones of voice to convey ideas. His words carried inflections as he explained that crosses—he lifted one—would bring nothing in a Protestant market. Melted, with the stones pried out, they ran up a bill for labor. Secrecy came high. Ora Bradstreet fingered everything appraisingly, touched topaz, amethyst, and even sapphire with a dismissing gesture, then with a happier expression weighted in his hand and set aside a chain of fine gold links.

The two men leaned even farther over the table and got down to haggling in earnest, one raising a finger, two fingers, the other shaking his head. Once the deacon objected, "If I pay what you want, how'll I ever be able to order a new table and a set of eight chairs from Thomas Chippendale? Chippendale doesn't sell cheap."

While Ora Bradstreet went to an inlaid drawer in his desk—he was calling it his *escritoire*—the emerald brooch glittered apart in its splendor. Twad had been where emeralds are mined. He knew something of gem stones. Glass? Everything on the table was authentic. The brilliance of those facets could not be counterfeit. Through his knothole, the engineer watched two rogues, one expertly cheating the other.

He was hardly surprised when the deacon, his eye now roving occasionally to the emeralds, sighed and began to talk of his perils. No pirate could appreciate the danger from a sister's prying children, little limbs of Satan inspired by the Evil One to poke into everything. He sighed more deeply. If anything were discovered, if his probity were tainted with a hint of scandal, he would have to live in foreign parts. A deeper sigh. Horror of prison shadowed his days. Then his gloom lightened. He fingered the gold chain appreciatively. He murmured, "Prison. No, it would hardly come to that."

Solemnly he counted out large and small silver coins, under some pressure adding gold ones. He gestured at the jewelry. With a sudden motion his finger indicated the emerald brooch. Again the syllables came with studied slowness. "Girl. Think it pretty." The pirate hardly cared. He was scooping up real coins—money. The brooch was thrown in as a knicknack.

The engineer watched the deacon hurry his accomplice to a back stairs. Both men tiptoed. Afterward the deacon settled comfortably and gave himself to wholehearted admiration of the emerald brooch. His lips moved. He muttered.

Thinking of presentation speeches if you mean it for a girl? Twad asked inaudibly.

Ora Bradstreet extended the

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gems with a flourish. "For a green-eyed doxy," he told the candlelight. "But how deliver it?" He started to box various pins and bracelets before putting them under lock and key. The emeralds had a square of silk all their own, secured by cords.

Where in God's name am I? Twad wished he could believe he'd watched some sort of play-acting, but there was nothing of a stage set in the woodwork round him.

Hallucination? He didn't believe he'd sunk into any sort of dream. He clenched his fingers. The nails bit in. They hurt—in no dreamlike way. He was broad awake and staring into Chippendale's century. He looked through the peephole more carefully and recognized the table where the deacon and the pirate had leaned. It was downstairs now. *Now? When was now?*

He stared around. The hall was lit by one bayberry candle he had hardly noticed. He was not alone. A slim and muscular young man stared at him, grey eyes level under wavy sorrel hair. Mouth firm without being grim. He regarded someone he felt he could get along with, until he realized with a shock that he was staring through scented candlelight into a mirror, looking at himself.

He tiptoed past his reflection to the door by which he'd come in. Beyond, the wide paneled hall with its stairs differed from its modern counterpart replacing the burnt original. But he could let himself out. He went down and into the spring night, then looked around the wide street, unfamiliar with its two rows of small elms, recently set out. Houses suggested Williamsburg here, Deerfield there. Across the way he saw something he'd known: the Lortonbury-Greene Mansion, lodestone for twentieth-century tourists. He looked at it with relief, and felt himself breathing more easily, seeing that landmark. The mansion had the most beautiful doorway in America. How well he recalled the broken scroll pediment with its delicately carved pineapple. He stepped toward it through the moonlight, stood on tiptoe before the sleeping house, and being tall, could just reach the carving with his fingertips. The pineapple was as real to touch as to sight.

I seem to have stepped into one of the thirteen colonies. But Time Past, how could it ever be more than an unsubstantial memory as second ticks after second? How could a man walk back into it as he walks into a hall in a museum?

He went down the street wondering where in the multiplicity of universes dreamed up by physicists he might be. His mind groped.

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A few minutes ago, or a good two centuries, I opened a door in the wall behind me. I saw the unbelievable. I should be floundering in confusion but everything seems—well, matter-of-fact.

Back in South America—I mean how far ahead in what future—I did a think-piece one night when I couldn't sleep, modeled myself universes with their four dimensions—at least four—curved according to the latest theories. Let's see—each cosmos formed a shell over or under the one next to it. Hell's bells, the thing came out like the skins of an onion. Suppose it's true. Suppose I've moved from layer to layer. If—if one layer could slide past another, or maybe get stuck behind, time correspondence would be altered: the then *of one of my universes would be the* now *of another.*

He whistled under his breath while his eye roved from substantial home to substantial home.

Damn it all, why should this happen to me? Am I unstable in some way? Did the electrons that make up my body get out of whack, form an unusual configuration that corresponded to or compensated for something in my universe next door? And by all that's unholy, I'm smack against my family again.

Some members always were unusually sensitive to electricity. Grandma, so placid, got positively jittery at a thunderclap. And then at the family reunion wasn't I wrought up beyond all reason? Could I have been caught up in some mysterious electric storm blowing from universe to universe?

He felt quiet enough now, though baffled. He had a problem passing any he'd ever faced. In the jungle he'd often been the one white man among savages. He had fought floods. Always he'd met a problem with calm, even though sometimes it was an energetic calm. He'd do his best with the present incredible situation.

His brow furrowed as a possibility flashed into his mind: *If I returned in some inscrutable way to my own time, would I remember this? How does memory work?*

Then more pressingly: *As a twentieth-century man, what treatment will I meet here? Will they think I'm a lunatic? Didn't they chain madmen in prisons? Better watch the way I talk.*

The moon cast his shadow in front of him. For the first time he got the impact of his clothes in a Georgian street as his silhouette preceded him. He was as conspicuous as if he wore motley and pranced along with cap and bells. This realization made him cross the street quietly and slip from pool to pool of shadow, moving quickly across bridges of moon-bathed earth that linked one blackness to another.

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As the young man glanced about, this familiar-unfamiliar world disturbed him in a different way. The spring-hinting air, he supposed. It did that to anyone who was young—in any century, in any universe. The moon was full in a cloudless sky. The breeze ruffled his hair like an affectionate and playful woman.

Sometimes, especially in this month, Twad knew misgivings. He'd had an adventurous life, but he was a man without roots. He'd halfway love a girl, be ready to fall utterly into her mysterious power—but before he knew, he was whisked off on some new project as civilization altered hinterlands, tamed rivers, opened mountains, caused a plain to sprout cities as if a metropolis could come up like a mushroom. But if he were wiped out in the life of occasional violence that he lived, who would really care? While he dwelt for an instant on his regrets, daffodil fragrance reached him, somehow easing the faint heartache.

Then he caught a muffled footstep. Someone else came down the street as furtively as he. Yet the engineer could almost feel the rhythm of someone who expected waves under his feet instead of the firmness of land. He suspected the pirate had lurked in some alley and was now moving under the impression the village highway was deserted.

The man from another world pressed himself into something twiggy, someone's lilac hedge, most likely. He peered back. He'd guessed correctly. He saw the pirate.

Twad thought fast. A pirate would be likely to leave this thoroughfare of stately houses with trim lawns. He'd take some quiet, shabby lane that branched off toward the shore. For Twad a waterfront was rich in possibility. If he could connect with a coastwise voyage, pass off his clothes as something from foreign parts, he might have a chance, even if a poor one, to get his bearings before too many men sized him up as a ninny.

Why wouldn't they? What did he know? He felt sure it was April. It must be the eighteenth century. His clothes were impossibly wrong. There his certainties ended.

The pirate drew abreast of Twad, hurrying, bounding across the moonlit areas. He swerved easily where the footing would not be good. The road was full of evidence that horses were common.

Twad knew the general direction of the sea from his own boyhood. What he wanted was the quickest way there. He had an idea that the pirate would unconsciously be a useful bodyguard. Who'd linger near a man of that stripe? For all the look of peace on either side of the young elms, the

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town might have its share of cutthroats and pickpurses. And he carried coins. He thought of their dates and shook his head. Still silver was silver.

The pirate turned right abruptly. He was going down a narrow lane, less spruce than the main street. Some old sycamores, relics from a partly cleared forest, shoved their roots trickily across the way. Moonlight lit up a patch of trillium. For Twad it had more charm than the well-kept street he had left, which here and there had a certain rawness in its new fashion.

With relief Twad noted the seclusion. He might do a little work on his clothes here, still keeping his eye on the pirate. He slipped off his shoes and some rather expensive socks he'd bought for the family party. He rolled his trousers to the knee. Up to the waist he suggested a sailor. His legs were tanned enough. He decided to keep his jacket, vest, and shoes in a roll. He fingered his necktie, almost the width of a sash and colored like the harbor of a Mediterranean fishing village—a present, the in thing this season. Around his waist it should give a nautical suggestion. He opened his shirt at the neck.

Then he saw where the pirate, not yet out of sight, was heading. In front of him he made out a shanty. As he eyed it with formless misgiving, someone inside struck up a song. A light winked on at an upper window and flickered quickly out.

I haven't lived in Caribbean countries for nothing. I know where there'll be women and rum. Of course the son of a bitch is heading for a grogshop, no doubt the most disreputable in the place. He'll be there for hours. He's loaded with money. To hell with shortcuts!

Twad turned sharply and for some reason looked up. Along a bough overhead, a girl rested with the casual grace of a forest creature. He could not make out the tint of her hair. In the wood's twilight it told as grey. But a small opening let a shaft of moonlight through, to fall on her brow and her eyes. He caught a glint of green. He thought of dark-brilliant wings of jungle butterflies.

I'm back in South America. No. I'm in a new universe and I was never more alive, never clearer about myself. I've been struck by a lightning that leaves me unburned. I'm in love. Madly. Deliriously. They told me it sometimes happened like this. They told me the truth. It has.

While he stared, she melted among the leaves, leaving almost as noiselessly as if she had butterfly wings.

He sorted the wild impressions he had received in the last— Was it only an hour? Before his eyes emeralds glittered. He heard the

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muted, "But how deliver them?" The deacon had to let this nymph, this wood sprite know the keepsake was from him. Yet a man in his position couldn't risk having those enigmatic gems traced directly.

A plan began to form in Twad's mind as he stood under the bough where he had seen the green-eyed girl. She was made to wear emeralds. One way, he guessed, led back to her, devious, chancy: The deacon needed a messenger to deliver the gem stones he would always declare were glass, no matter who failed to believe.

The engineer rubbed earth and bark over his shirt. It grew stained enough, rumpled enough to have come through many vicissitudes. He made his way back to the deacon's house. He located the right window, curtained but with light showing. *So you're still putting your loot to bed, you old reprobate.* Stooping, the young man scooped up some gravel and, making sure the other windows were dark, threw his gravel against the panes.

The window opened swiftly. The deacon was evidently no stranger to signals. Twad watched him peering bewildered from candlelight into moonlight. Probably he expected a pirate. The young man let the other's curiosity and apprehension grow before he said softly from the dark, "Might you need a trusty messenger, Ora Bradstreet?"

The deacon hesitated a long while. Then, equally low, "Who sent you?"

"Hm, say good friends, sir. Could you use a man tonight? One who's no blabbermouth—" he emphasized the next words, "—and no thief."

"How do I know you're he? And though you know my name, I don't yet know yours."

"Mayhap," the archaisms came easily, "I'll tell you when the night's work is over. Certainly not before. Well—" A silence. "Of course if you've no need of me, I can be off."

"Not so hasty. We may yet do business if you can furnish me some proofs of your trustworthiness." It was Twad's turn to be nonplussed. "Come, come, fellow. Speak up!"

Twad had been taken through the Lortonbury-Greene Mansion since his childhood. "John Lortonbury has a mantel carved with cupids and shepherdesses."

"Why, 'tis so." He took the deacon by surprise. Clearly he, the stranger in the dark, knew the interior of the mansion—and well.

"Have you ever tried to lift a shepherdess's head away from the wood?"

"And if I did—?"

"I can be careful with a secret. I'll leave the rest to you."

The deacon made a slight harrumphing noise in his throat.

"Cupids," the engineer went

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on. "This may not be the first time I've served as Cupid's go-between." As he spoke, he was thinking hard of something quite different that might with luck establish him as a confidential agent. He remembered a secret drawer always shown to tourists. "There's a hiding place for valuables in the Chippendale desk, even John's not yet found it." Twad stopped abruptly. He hoped the desk had already been brought over. He said quickly, "It could hold gold enough to buy your emerald brooch twice." Then he waited.

Evidently his luck held. When the deacon spoke, his words were a whiplash for sharpness. "You speak Spanish, seaman?"

"Aye, sir. My tongue's fluent with English too, as you can hear."

He did not have to wait for the veiled threat to sink in.

"I haven't said yet I'd employ you," Ora Bradstreet temporized. "And I can't pay much. I have a trifle here, bits of glass. Emeralds!" The older man risked a laugh. "Far from that, very far. Never believe the lies a man tells you when he's in his cups."

"Your word against his, sir, and you're a man with property. Twelve shillings for safe delivery of the glass, then." *As if I care what you pay.*

"Twelve shillings! Make it two."

"Two." Twad's heart thumped at the prospect of meeting her. "And the longer we talk, the more chance someone sees us both, though the moon's near setting."

Ora Bradstreet drew in his breath with a sound like a small hiss.

"Now, my directions."

"The maid—to think that seaman knew enough English to follow what I said—the maid to whom I want this bauble delivered lives in Parson's Lane."

"Parson's Lane."

"Fifth as you walk north. Two chestnut trees grow in front of the doorway. You can't miss unless she's on one of those rambles she learned in her captivity. If she is, wait. Her chamber's in a little ell with a white birch by the window. Tap till you wake her. Her foster mother tells me she's a light sleeper. Let her know this is from me." He fumbled about his person and produced a remembered package. "And don't you make any indecent proposition to her just because of the hour. Some lads have tried that and lived to repent."

The engineer held out his hand for the brooch being lowered on a string. Only, with touching the palm-sized bundle, the young man saw eyes green as the curve of a wave, as the iridescence on a butterfly's wing, things clean and lovely. As he walked away, he had an impulse to throw the brooch filched from some dead beauty

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into a hedge he was passing. He resisted it. The gems belonged to the green-eyed girl, and he had undertaken to deliver them.

"I knew you would come back. I knew. I knew." A whisper so soft he felt he heard a thought.

"When I saw you, suddenly I knew the way to follow you." He could not make his words delicately low as hers.

"Sh! If we talk we must do it elsewhere. I will come out."

He waited in starlight by the birches. When she came, she slipped her hand in his and drew him along with her. She seemed to know paths through the soles of her feet. He told her that when they stopped.

"I was an Indian captive when I was a child. They brought me from Canada. I belong elsewhere, not here." He caught the hint of a French accent. "I am not truly like the people of this town."

"You are not like anyone, anywhere. But if I start talking about you, I'll forget what I was sent to do. This is for you, a brooch. I was told where you lived so I could deliver it. From Deacon Ora Bradstreet." He handed her what he carried.

"Deacon Ora Bradstreet? That greasy old man!" He heard her toss the gift away.

"Have a care of that."

"I can find it tomorrow. Will you return it to him for me?"

"Then he'll think I never delivered his keepsake. Besides, tomorrow—"

She sighed.

If I found my way back to this French-Canadian girl with her green eyes, I may hope for a second miracle. The whole night grew perfumed with a delicious unreality, and the girl beside him was formed magically of all the night held. He spoke suddenly.

"The main street here, it was laid out recently, wasn't it? Have you—is there—a surveyor's office here in the town?" He held his breath.

"Surveyors, yes. You mean you can lay out blocks and streets and sites for houses? There is much business in these parts."

"Then I'm their man." He wondered what they paid, for he thought of a hundred things needful for domesticity as he sat beside her. The dreams of a coastal voyage were lost, banished. Of course they would be married. She would not be sitting on the moss, leaning her head against his shoulder as he encouraged her to, if fate did not intend marriage for them both. *I have come so far, from another universe, another century. Yet I feel at home here. There must be a meaning under it all.*

He bent over her a little. "I don't even know what they call you."

"Mathilde." Her fingers rested lightly on the back of his hand.

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A touch of fingers with no more flesh than a canary's feet. And chatter. Chatter. Spates of chatter with less meaning than any bird singing. How living and the years can be a woman's enemies! With his other hand he covered Mathilde's fingers, a softly warm delight.

The older Mathilde in her different century, had she made an unhappy marriage? Did she take refuge in endless chatter as some creatures seek shelter in woodlands? Did she hide under the sound of her own voice?

He held this girl's fingers the more tenderly as he laid them over his heart. "Mathilde. Mathilde." The words blotted out everything else.

"And your name?"

"Theodore." Twad was something left like a toy on a beach, juvenile, forgotten.

"Theodore. Does not your name mean *a gift of God?*

"So it does. I'd almost forgotten."

"Perhaps your mother used to remind you when you were very little. My mother made me cookies before the Mohawks carried me away."

He had wondered about her captivity. He felt sure any New Englanders who came upon her would feel the need of ransoming her. Surely the braves and squaws must have been kind to her, or she would not be so fearless with a stranger. He dragged himself back from a kind of dreamland. He had been given a trust and he felt it was only half fulfilled, for he had something of his own to add.

"That brooch. I heard the deacon call it glass, but it . . . might have greater value. It has real beauty." He felt she would get the hint.

"That man—Since I was sixteen—"

"Not very long ago."

"Long enough for him to send gifts that fill a small chest, Theodore. He has been speaking to my foster parents."

"Asking for you in marriage? He'd dare?"

"Yes, I am sure. They keep telling me what good fortune it would be for a girl to marry a man well established, with considerable wealth—" She broke off. "Where does he get that wealth, I wonder. Not from any apothecary's shop."

"Shrewd lass."

"I wish I were a boy. I'd travel away from this place, from an old man who pesters me and keeps the young men away. But what of that?"

"He has not kept me away, lass. Nor shall he." And Theodore's arms were round her.

Presently she whispered, "I wish for your sake I was beautiful. I never cared till now."

He ran his finger over her cheekbone, as if drinking in her peasant strength. "Yours is the

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only face I ever wished to see again and again." He kissed her eyelids over the lovely eyes.

"With you I can love without feeling savage. I was always in my thought a little afeared, not of love but of myself. It would be most terrible to love with the body and hate with the heart, both at once."

"It could never be like that between *us.*"

"Never."

The rest was kisses while his hands touched her. He felt her tremble.

"Don't be afraid." He held her no closer, though his arms stayed round her. "Tell me where we shall travel after—"

"After we are married. You know more of the world than I. Tell me where we shall go after you have surveyed here for a while."

They dreamed up a hundred plans and changed them. Something made him say, "I'll level with you—"

"Level with?"

"I mean be honest. You'll be marrying a man with no money."

Her answer was a laugh. It came like music through the spring night, and he knew suddenly spring was all the despairs all lovers had ever felt—or all the hopes. It was all the hopes now. He would carve a place for them both in the world. He had skills, had knowledge that might seem almost supernatural. He would pay it out slowly, like a man spending precious metal. To hell with doubts, with the negative side! He had an opportunity such as had never come to anyone. For her he would use it to the full.

Her lips were soft while she put his hand on her bodice where the laces held it together and let his fingers be rapid among the cords. He felt her tremble again, but now he was sure she wished to tremble. The night air blended new budding wood scents with the more distant tang of the sea. From somewhere came the unexpected fragrance from daffodils already opened.

They were lying in a hollow where dry leaves had drifted. He felt them blanket him and her from any chill in the early winds. She was so new to love she made him wish only to be gentle. Breast to bare breast they touched.

She was weeping a little for she had been virgin, but she would not let him out of her arms. He had no wish to sleep. He had no words of his own for the delight she had given him. As tribute he whispered in her ear something remembered, lines of a poet still to be born with his music and his romance.

" 'Life of Life! thy lips enkindle
With their love the breath between them;
And thy smiles before they dwindle
Make the cold air fire—'

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Not my words but they are fit for you."

Again they mingled. After a long time she said, "If ever you left me, went away forever—"

Now it was his turn to laugh, all the new-come strength of April rushing through him. "We have been one. For true oneness there is no change. Believe me. I could never even wish to leave you."

"For you I shall shut gloom out of my mind."

"No, tell me. Let it be the first time I comfort you."

She hesitated. "If . . . If . . ." Then in a rush, close to tears again, "If I were deserted, I think I would bear your child and after die . . . I think."

He put his fingers against her lips, then closed them more firmly. "Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred." The old tag suddenly made sense.

Her fingertips stroked his shoulder. Her sleepy voice said, "But you are cold." Then wide awake, "Dear love, put on—I should have thought more about you. Theo, hurry."

He dressed, completely. The nip of the air was now too sharp for him to worry about disguises. Through the trees he glimpsed the stars. Each bright one glittered like a nova. He looked at Mathilde lying drowsy beneath those incredible constellations. It was as if he saw them with more than his eyes. They were the song pulsing so magnificently through his body. They were the ritual dance of heaven never truly seen till now. His muscles readied to dance with them while she slept, a whiteness in the starlight. He must cover her before she chilled.

This is to be alive, to know joy at its crest. Every cell in my body still tingles with ecstasy. Where does emotion end and flesh begin? Does it matter on this night so different it could be the burgeoning of a new universe?

Twad felt unaccountably crackly with electricity, as if he had been stroking fur in cold, dry weather. But it wasn't cold, nor specially dry. The silk of Aunt Mathilde's shawl over his arm wouldn't account for the now dimming sensations that had permeated his entire body.

Spring wind through an open casement brought him the earthy sweetness of daffodils. Their odor always seemed romantic, as if in April the loam yearned. Momentarily it saddened him.

From the floor below, sounds of festivity reached him like muted chirpings. Sometimes his family got on his nerves but tonight was different. He felt in tune. Humming to himself, Twad hurried down the stairs. ◄

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The idea of mechanical matchmaking, i.e., "computer dating" has, we suppose, met with some limited success. But what kind of a match would be made by a computer programmed to translate the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds?

MATCHMAKER, MATCHMAKER

by Leonard Tushnet

"IT WAS FATED," AS EMANUEL Brody's grandmother used to say of any catastrophe or a happy marriage. Put a language translator computer into the hands of very serious, very literal-minded seminary students and it was bound to happen. Real howlers were bound to come out. Like "Close your eyes when you drink grape juice" for "Look not on the wine when it is red," or "Villains run from no one" for "The wicked flee when no man pursueth," or "Tell different lies to men and to women" for Leviticus 18:22.

Fortunately for the project, Emanuel Brody, the pale, thin redbeard who edited the printouts, was intelligent. When the computer translated the Hebrew *ruach* so that a passage read "He passed wind," Brody thought awhile, adjusted his skullcap, twisted an earlock, and substituted "His spirit left him." The project, a variorum English translation of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds together with the pertinent medieval rabbinical responsa and commentaries thereon, could not have gone on without Brody, the Director of the Seminary told him. And since there were so many recensions of the material, the project would certainly last a long time. Brody's economic future was assured.

He should have been happy but he was not. He was in love. For a year he had been courting Eva, the second daughter of Rabbi Hersh Goralnick, the very orthodox leader of a congregation in Fort Lee, across the Hudson River. Rabbi Goralnick had no ob-

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jections to Brody as a son-in-law. Indeed, he favored him. The wedding canopy would have been set up long ago had it not been for Eva's older sister, Miriam, who was still unmarried. Miriam, an independent dark-haired beauty, taught school in Harlem; she had her own apartment on 104th Street near Central Park West; she had newfangled ideas and rejected all the young men brought to her attention by her father and the professional matchmakers. Brody, burning with passion for Eva and well aware that Rabbi Goralnick would not let his oldest daughter be shamed by having Eva marry before her, tried his best to interest Miriam in the eligible bachelors of his acquaintance. Miriam smiled and said, "Love has to be spontaneous. I'll wait until the right man comes along."

Emanuel Brody waited too. He sighed and lost his appetite and rocked back and forth at his work, trying to find a way either to circumvent Rabbi Goralnick's insistence on Jewish custom or to marry off Miriam.

One afternoon he punched the tape with a question put in 1168 to the great French glossarist, Rabbi Jacob ben Meir, of Troyes. "If a man die on the morning of his daughter's wedding day, must not the marriage be postponed out of respect for him?" Lights flashed; tapes clicked. Out came the precedents for the rabbi's reply; there were no succedents, his answer being so logical. "The Lord (Blessed be His Name!) gave as his first commandment, 'Be fruitful and multiply.' The commandment to honor one's mother and father comes later. The wedding should take place."

Brody had an idea. He thought—if the union of man and woman were so desirable, then parental objection could bear no weight. That sounded reasonable. If now he could justify himself by the Law and the Commentaries—There was one way to find out. The memory banks of the computer held the answer. He asked it, "Is it permissible for a man to marry a woman without her father's consent?" Again the lights flashed; the tapes rolled. The answer came: "Yes, if the woman is pregnant, lest she bring forth a bastard. No, for Jacob could not marry Rachel without Laban's agreement even though the marriage was foreordained by the Covenant with Abraham. Yes, if the father is a lunatic. No, because . . ." And so on for thirty-one reasons pro and thirty-one con, each with citation and reference.

Brody sorrowfully shook his head. Such equivocation was of no help to him. But in his desperation he thought of using the computer as a matchmaker. Why not? There were computer dating machines, weren't there? He fed into

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the machine a complete description of Miriam, scrupulously accurate in every detail, and asked who would be a likely mate for her. The answer came quickly, "Solomon Davidson." Brody stared in astonishment. What kind of a reply was that? He had expected a generalization, a set of clues he could talk over with Eva. Instead, he had got a specific name.

That evening he told Eva what he had done and what the machine had said. She clapped her hands. "It's a sign from Heaven! Let's find a Solomon Davidson and arrange for him to meet Miriam. That shouldn't be too difficult. Davidson's a fairly common name and so is Solomon." They got a Manhattan telephone directory and looked at the list of Davidsons.

"Woe is me!" Brody lamented. 317 Davidsons! One Solomon Davidson on West Tenth Street, and nine S. Davidsons! "How will we find the right one?"

"We'll find him." Eva was confident. "We'll start with the obvious. If that doesn't work, I'll sit at the phone all day tomorrow until I trace him."

Brody marveled at her technique. First she called the Solomon Davidson on West Tenth Street. "Mr. Davidson, I'm with Gobbledegook Cosmetics, doing a survey. Does your wife use our products?" When Mr. Davidson said he'd ask her, Eva hung up and crossed his name off her list. "He's married. One less." She phoned each of the S. Davidsons. She said, "I am from the Handicraft Society. Is there anyone there named Solomon? I am trying to trace a Solomon Davidson who won a TV set in a raffle." None of the S. Davidsons knew a Solomon. "That leaves 307," she told Brody. "Leave it to me."

Because she felt her happiness depended on finding Solomon Davidson, Eva was extremely careful. She went down the list, not skipping a single name, a job that eventually took three weeks. Out of the 307 she found eleven Solomons, one a middle name, none of whom had bought a raffle ticket for a TV set, of course.

Then Brody took over as the telephone surveyor for Gobbledegook Cosmetics. Of the eleven, eight were married. He went to visit the remaining three.

The first lived in Stuyvesant Village. He was an old man, shaking with palsy. Brody quickly excused himself, saying he had made a mistake.

The second lived on East 78th Street near Madison Avenue. The doorman saw Brody's black hat, the long coat, the beard and the earlocks, and gently explained to him that Mr. Solomon Davidson was a Scotsman.

Brody debated with himself whether to see the last on the list, a man who lived in a converted

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brownstone near Lincoln Center. He was discouraged by now. Was he not being a fool, a superstitious fool who had substituted the silly response of a mechanical device for common sense, who had looked to a machine for the answer to his problem just as the Kabbalists had looked to numerology for the date of the coming of the Messiah? He walked up and down before the house, and then shrugged. What was to be lost? He rang the bell.

Solomon Davidson himself opened the door, his finger holding his place in his book. Brody's heart leaped within him when he saw Davidson. This was surely the man! "May I come in?" he asked. "I have a personal matter to discuss with you."

Davidson raised his eyebrows. "With me?" He ushered Brody into a large room lined with bookcases. He turned off a softly playing Bach record. Davidson was handsome, clean shaven, about Miriam's age, with a scholarly stoop and glasses he kept pushing up on his nose.

Brody, ordinarily a diffident man given to stammering in the presence of strangers (like Moses Our Teacher, he said to himself), felt Aaron's tongue in him. He became eloquent in his cause. He came directly to the point. "I am Emanuel Brody, in charge of the translation computer at . . ." and he went on to tell of his problem with his prospective father-in-law and of the computer's solution. "Do not laugh, Mr. Davidson. This is very serious. You will be doing a *mitzvah,* a good deed, if you will meet Miriam. Even if you don't like her, and why you wouldn't I don't know, she is such a wonderful person, maybe one of your friends will." He continued, extolling Miriam's physical beauty, her mental attributes, and her spiritual virtue until Davidson interrupted him.

"Mr. Brody, you sound like a *Shadchan,* a matchmaker. Are you telling me the truth? My mother has been after me to get married, and I wouldn't be surprised if she's sent you to me. I can tell you right now that I'm not interested. I must admit, though, that your approach is very clever. That story about the computer is far-fetched but ingenious."

Brody assured him that deceit was not in his mind. To prove his good faith, he suggested that Davidson meet Eva and him for dinner the next night. "At a kosher restaurant, of course." Davidson reluctantly agreed.

Eva convinced him. "If your sister is like you," he said gallantly, "maybe we'll have a double wedding."

Eva blushed. "From your mouth to God's ear," she said. A practical woman, she pressed on for details about Davidson. He was an instructor in philosophy at

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Davis College in Brooklyn, a candidate for a Ph.D. degree, now working on his dissertation. She laughed triumphantly. "And Miriam is a teacher! I just know you'll get along!"

Davidson laughed, too. He consented to call Miriam for a double date with Brody and Eva. "It'll be a lark," he said, "and I'll be doing you and my mother a favor."

Whether it was biology or chemistry or the spring or the circumstances of their meeting or God's will, Miriam and Davidson didn't know and didn't care. They met, they were immediately attracted to each other, and after a whirlwind courtship, they were married. So were Eva and Brody, with the blessing of Rabbi Goralnick.

A few months after the honeymoon, Eva, in New York on a shopping trip, came to visit Brody at the seminary. She stood in the air-conditioned computer room and watched the lights go on and off. She kissed Brody and said, "I ought to kiss the machine, too. It deserves something for being such a good matchmaker. But I don't understand yet how it came up with the name of Solomon Davidson. As a matter of fact, I don't know how that machine works at all."

Brody demonstrated. "See. I punch a card with the known data of the query. I feed it in here . . ."

At the end of his explanation, Eva shook her head. "All right. But why Solomon Davidson?" She giggled. "Ask the machine now that it's safe whom Solomon Davidson should marry."

Brody punched out the card. A couple of minutes later he read the reply and roared. "Look! The mate of Solomon the son of David should be the Shulamite! I described Miriam as best as I could as a brunette beauty. The machine is limited to theological analogies. Miriam's description fits that of the bride of King Solomon as she is depicted in the Song of Songs!"

Eva leaned over and kissed the manufacturer's nameplate on the machine. "Some marriages are made in Heaven. Miriam's and mine were made in Torrington, Connecticut."

Coming next month

The Faceless Man

a thrilling new novel by JACK VANCE

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This strong story concerns a human child who has been integrated into an alien race in ways that are mysterious, even dangerous, to the humans who try to reclaim him. Gordon Eklund lives in San Francisco. "I sold my first piece about a year ago and have sold a number of others since, mostly science fiction (which I've read and lived since I was twelve) and including a novel. I'm married, like to watch old movies, and have a year old son."

SEEKER FOR STILL LIFE

by Gordon Eklund

THERE WAS WATER ON TOP OF the mountain.

It wasn't exactly a lake, barely fifteen feet across, but it was blue, and it was wet. Ford crouched at the edge of the pool and dipped his hands in the water. Blood trickled from his scarred fingers, staining the water, making crimson patches in the placid blue.

"How are your hands, Tensi?" Ford said.

The squat black man shook his head and raised two three-fingered hands. "My skin's too tough."

Ford removed his hands from the water and wiped them on his pants. "We'll wait for dawn, then head down. I think we can make it in two days."

"I want to commune tonight," Tensi said. "We're the first. The magic should be strong, untapped."

"And I want to eat," Ford said. He removed two wafers from his back pack and pushed one between thick, swollen lips. He cut it with his teeth and let the moistness soothe his tongue. Then he walked to the edge of the peak and peered into the valley below.

"About 5,000 feet, wouldn't you say, Tensi?"

"About that. There are much higher mountains to the east. But I haven't been there in years."

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"Anybody ever climb them?"

Tensi chuckled. "We don't climb mountains. We haven't the time."

"But you came with me?"

"I'm studying your foreign ways. I watch, but form no judgments. When I know you better than I know myself, then I'll write a book about you."

"Remind me to remain mysterious. And it's getting dark."

Tensi nodded, an expression he'd learned from Ford and one that he often used. "It's going to be cold up here. In the winter, it snows."

"I'll sleep through it. I'm bushed."

Tensi nodded again.

Ford waited until the darkness was complete, then went to his blanket. He sat on it and rubbed his hands together. Already it was cold, close to freezing. The cuts on his hands had healed rapidly. Only a few spots of dried blood marked where they'd been. It had taken them three days to make it up the mountain. Twice he'd wanted to turn back, but Tensi had laughed at him, and he'd continued.

Ford had climbed a mountain on Earth once, one in the Rockies, and the old motions had been slow in returning. But, still, three days. That was a long time in which to climb, crawling ever upward toward an unseen destination. He missed the village and the girls and the warm fires. Three days, he thought. Next time, we'll do it in two.

Tensi was communing, leaning against a rock, his eyes shut, his head tilted at an awkward angle, his mouth slightly open.

"Why did you want to climb the mountain, Ford?" His voice was thick and guttural, a slow drawl.

"Because it was there," Ford quoted. "Because wherever it is, I follow."

"Explain?"

Ford shrugged. "I can't. Perhaps later. When we get down."

"The magic is strong up here," Tensi said, "and clear, as clear as the pond is clear."

Ford nodded and stretched out on the ground, cupping his neck in his hands. He pulled a blanket over his body and felt the warmth encircle his chest.

He looked at the sky and at the stars, knowing that what was up would soon be down. He wondered about Maria. Would he still be able to recognize her? Surely, after ten years, she'd have changed. She would be fat and awkward. Her eyes would be wrinkled, her lips bloated.

But Ford knew better than this. Maria would not be one to grow soft and weak. Not with her wealth, not with her drive. She would have changed even less than he, and he had not changed at all.

At first, it looked like a shooting

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star, but it was too big, and as it moved closer, it grew. Tensi, from the emotional sanctuary of communion, saw it too. He watched, nodding carefully.

"Is that her?"

"It must be," Ford said. "Odd. I was just thinking of her. I'm glad she waited until we reached the top."

"She is a patient woman?"

"She is many things," Ford said, "but she is not patient. Luvra has talked to her, but she hasn't listened."

"She has waited ten years," Tensi said, "to find her son . . . your son."

"Her son," Ford corrected. He crawled out of the blanket and rolled it into a tight ball. "Better gather up your things, Tensi. I don't want to make her wait."

Tensi sighed loudly. "I must disperse the communion. The magic was good. It will only take a moment."

"I'm sorry," Ford said and used the time to gather their belongings. He packed everything and carried it to the cliff's edge. Then he looked down at the valley. *She's there,* he thought. *Ten years have not changed me enough. Can I face her?*

Tensi tapped him on the shoulder. He'd attached his mechanical wings, and he motioned Ford to mount his back. Ford moved around and hooked his arms around Tensi's wide shoulders.

"Ready?" Tensi said.

"Ready."

They rose swiftly into the air. Tensi dipped his head, and they dived, whizzing past the jagged mountain, the valley twisting and turning below them, the brown rocks growing and tilting.

When they were a hundred yards above the ground, Tensi lifted his shoulders and broke the dive. He flapped his wings and moved them toward the village. They landed at the edge of the fire.

The landing craft rested near a circle of trees. It was painted a sharp, glimmering violet, and the fire cast tall shadows against its bulk. Ford saw three figures squatting near it, one a woman. He left Tensi and walked over.

"Hello, Ford," Maria said. "I'm happy you could join us."

He saw immediately that he'd guessed correctly. The ten years of separation had left Maria untouched. Her body was thin, her features sharp and definite, her stance tense and rigid. More than anything else, he noticed her nose. It had always been her single remarkable feature, either too large or too small for her face; Ford had never been sure which.

"Hello, Maria," he said. "And this is . . . Elliot?"

"Elliot Winter." The big man stuck out a big hand and wrapped it around Ford's knuckles. "You know why we're here."

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"I know," Ford said, extracting his hand. "Why don't you join me by the fire? I don't know about you, but I haven't eaten all day."

"Is it safe?" Elliot said, lowering his voice to a murmur. "I don't want Maria exposed to any unnecessary danger."

"It's perfectly safe," Ford said. "Maria knows that."

"I know that," she confirmed.

The three of them went over to the fire. The fourth man, the pilot, remained silently beside his craft. Ford sat down and crossed his legs. Maria and Elliot stayed on their feet. A short, heavy native woman ran up to Ford and dropped a plate of vegetables into his lap. He ate them messily with his fingers, an act which seemed to displease Elliot.

"You know why we're here," Maria said. "Are you going to help us?"

Ford paused in midbite and wiped his hands on his shirt. "Your presence on this planet is illegal," he said. "I could have you thrown off."

"Bull," Elliot said. "You wouldn't dare."

Ford looked at his plate, then lifted his eyes. "Don't bet on that."

Maria interrupted. "All we want is the boy, Ford. Let us have him and we'll leave."

"I don't know where he is."

Maria's black, expressionless eyes seemed to quiver. "You don't know where your own son is?"

"I haven't seen him since he was taken away," Ford said.

"You've been here all these years—do you even care about him?"

"I care more about him than you do, Maria. You were content to ignore him for ten years. I intend to leave him alone forever."

"Why?" This from Elliot in a sharp, tense voice.

"Because he's a Euchran now. He's thirteen years old. Among these people, that makes him near middle age."

"But he's a human being. Your own flesh and blood."

"He was," Ford said.

"He *is*," Maria insisted.

"Perhaps he is," Ford said. He'd returned to his meal, speaking between mouthfuls. "As I said, I haven't seen him in ten years. But I have seen the other children. And, Maria, they're no more human than Tensi is." Ford pointed a greasy finger at his friend, who sat nearby. "And he's not very human."

"You can say that again." Tensi grinned and nodded.

Elliot scowled and turned to Ford. "Where are these other children you've seen?"

"About thirty miles. East."

"We'll go see them. They must know where Raymond is."

"You'll have to walk."

"Why? What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Euchra; it's a

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restricted world—no technologically advanced articles allowed. If you intend to stay, your landing craft must return to your ship. I'm liaison agent here. I don't make the rules, but I enforce them."

"And if I refuse?"

"In that case, I'll notify District Central of your presence and request the permanent revocation of your travel permit. Besides, I don't think you'll have much luck finding the children if I'm not along to guide you."

Elliot started to bluster, but Maria waved him down. "We have to do what he says, Elliot, if we ever want to find Raymond. Can't you see what the problem is? He's been stuck in this hole for ten years. He's more like the natives than they are."

Ford and Tensi exchanged amused winks.

Elliot stood. "We'll return the landing craft in the morning. But you have to promise to lead us directly to the children."

Ford nodded.

"And you have to promise to keep leading us until we find Raymond."

"Or until you decide you don't want to find him," Ford said.

"That isn't a very likely event—but, yes, I'll agree to it."

"Fine," Ford said. "We leave tomorrow afternoon."

Elliot nodded crisply and pulled Maria away. Ford watched them move swiftly across the clearing. Their shrill voices faded into the distant hills.

She's changed, he thought. Not on the surface, where it doesn't matter, but underneath, where it does. Ten years ago, she'd still had a tiny spark of life buried within her. But that spark was gone now. She and Elliot made a fine pair. Both thought they were men, but neither was even a good woman.

Ford sighed and dropped his empty plate. He stood and walked past the fire, headed toward the mud huts of the village. His home was the second largest in the enclave, only slightly smaller than that of the all-powerful communion priest. The size was necessary in order to house the great bulk of his communication equipment. His relative power in the village had nothing to do with it. In the local pecking order, he was very near the bottom.

Pushing aside the thatched door, he entered the hut and sat cross-legged on the matted rugs of the front room. He heard a noise from the back and called, "Luvra, is that you?"

"Yes, Ford. Just a moment. I'm sending a report."

He leaned back on his haunches and rubbed his eyes. When he heard the girl enter, he looked up and forced a smile. Luvra was smaller and thinner than the average Euchran, more human in appearance despite her

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coal-black skin. Perhaps that's why I chose her, he thought, because of her humanness. Even here, I cannot escape my heritage.

"Are they here?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And?"

"I'm taking them out tomorrow."

She crouched behind him and rubbed his back, catching the tense muscles in her thick fingers and making them relax. "I thought you would. I saw them land, but I hid. I didn't want the woman to see me."

"You had a rough time with her?"

"I've been feeding her double-talk for a week. She's not a patient woman. Yesterday I told her a plague had struck the village, and that it was slowly killing everyone in a most dreadful fashion. I'm afraid she didn't believe me."

"Maria has never believed anyone in her life."

"She's a bitch."

Ford was taken aback. "Why? Because she used to be my wife? Because she bore me a child and you can't?" He regretted his words as soon as he spoke them, but Luvra acted amused.

"I think she's a bitch because she is a bitch." She shrugged then, as if saying: That's all.

Ford grabbed her hands and pulled her gently into his lap. As he held her loose body in his arms, he thought of Maria. He thought of the night during which Raymond had been conceived. It wasn't a difficult moment to remember. There had been so few, after the first passionate weeks.

"Do you hate her?" Luvra asked, lying still in his arms like a doll.

"I don't know. Perhaps, when this is over, then I'll know."

"She'll never take the boy. Not if she sees him."

"I know," Ford said. "And maybe that's why I'm going out there with her. Maybe I want to see the look in her eyes when she sees the boy."

"Perhaps she wants to see the look in your eyes."

"Perhaps."

He took her in his arms again and kissed her lips. This time, he didn't think of Maria.

Once before, they had been together, and Ford remembered:

He stood in the village, shading his eyes against the blistering sun, and she stood heavily at his side. They'd been married for five years, and sometimes it went well, and sometimes it did not. This had started out to be one of the good times.

"They're quaint," Maria said. "Like the Indians back on Earth. The real Indians. The ones who lived in America before the white men came."

"They're much older than that," Ford said, watching a Eu-

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chran woman pass with her burden of vegetables and fungi. "They were here long before the Indians came to America."

"How can you know that?"

"They have a history that goes back a million years or more. It isn't as exciting or bloody as ours, but it's more complete."

"I'd like to see it."

"You can't. It's not written down. It's more like a racial memory. One of them told me about it."

She snickered. "He probably lied. Wanted to impress the big rich man from Tamatra. A thousand years ago, I bet, they were still rooting for bugs in the canyons."

"I can show you relics. To the east. Many thousands of years old."

She shrugged. "Who cares? I don't care. These people concern me only because they're going to make us rich. All of us. You and me, Raymond, and—" patting her pregnant belly, "—the children."

But Ford was disturbed, unable to shake his anxiety. For months, he'd been studying the Euchran cutlure, and he knew that something was definitely wrong with these people. Since the arrival of the Earthmen, there had been changes, too many changes, some minor and some not. The Euchrans had grown physically thinner, a squat, heavy race whose sharp bones now protruded through thick skin. And there had been the violence. Physical violence among a people who hadn't known it for many thousands of years. Ford had wanted to help, and he'd asked questions of the villagers, but they'd refused to answer. He sensed their worry and fear, their fear of the people who had come upon them so abruptly and stayed so long.

It was illegal, of course. The Euchrans were an intelligent race, and their planet should properly have been restricted. But Raymond had found it first, and he'd found the Rulyan, the plant with the capability of feeding entire worlds. They'd been here for two years now, and the end was not in sight. Their profits had grown to enormous proportions, but Raymond was greedy, and Maria was greedy, and Ford was afraid.

"Let's go back to camp," Maria whispered. "These people frighten me. I get the feeling they're listening to every word I say."

"A few of them can understand you. Not any of these."

"Just your friends?"

"I suppose so."

"I wish you'd stay away from them. It's not safe. Raymond agrees. They killed that workman last week. For no reason."

"I remember." And Raymond had killed five Euchrans in return, including the village chieftain. "I'll talk to Raymond."

And, an hour later:

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Raymond was the boss. Ten years older than Ford, Raymond had always been the boss. Not just in their family import business, but in everything. Raymond was the boss.

Sitting in his brother's plush living room, Ford said, "I want to leave." Raymond's prefab had been constructed immediately upon their arrival, even before the harvesting of the initial Rulyan crop. Ford and Maria still lived in a native mud hut.

"You're afraid of the Euchrans?" Raymond said, lifting thick eyebrows and folding fat hands. "Don't be. I can handle them. They kill another of my men, and I'll kill fifty of them."

"I know you can handle them. That's what bothers me. I don't want to see them wiped out just because they're in our way."

"Rights have nothing to do with it. Nobody has any rights, not unless they can stand up and take them. I have no right to be here. But I'm here, and it's made me rich."

"That's why I think we ought to get out. We're rich now, but we won't be, if we're caught. We'll lose everything. We have nothing to gain by staying and everything to lose."

"Are you worried about the Federation? Don't be. I can handle them. A little money here, a little there. They stay off my back."

"Then let me take Maria away for a few months. The baby's due soon. I don't want it born here."

Raymond frowned. "I suppose I ought to tell you. We're in trouble. A Federation ship is cruising the area, looking for us. Somebody talked. I wish I knew who. If a ship leaves here, it's sure to be spotted."

"I thought you said we didn't have to worry about the Federation."

"We don't. Not if we sit still and let them go past. But nobody can leave till they're gone."

"What about Maria?"

"Maybe they'll go before she has the kid. I sure as hell hope so. If not . . . well, we have a doctor here."

Ford stood, shifting awkwardly on his feet. "How long have you known this?"

"Couple days. A friend flashed me the warning. Then I closed down the comm shop. I figured Maria'd told you. She was scared about the baby, too."

"You told Maria? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to bother you."

Ford started to say something, then turned to go.

"Ford?"

"Yes?" He turned slowly. "What is it?"

"One other thing. I want you to stay away from the village. Maria says you spend half your time down there. I know these people

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are interesting, but we're not a sociological expedition. We're here to make money."

"What do you want me to do?"

"The man who was killed was one of my foremen. I want you to take his place."

"In the fields?"

"Yes. Just for a little while. Some of the men have been muttering about you, and I don't like it. This'll shut them up. It's just a temporary thing."

And, three days later:

The sweat of the fields rolled off his back in thick streams. He kicked the door of the hut open and kissed his wife.

"The Euchrans killed the doctor, Ford."

"What? Oh, Christ."

"They don't know he's dead, but he's missing, and nothing else could have happened to him."

"Maybe he's drunk, passed out in the fields."

"Raymond checked, and there was blood all around the hut. Raymond says he's going to kill every Euchran he can find."

"Oh, Christ." He paused. "I better talk to him." Turning quickly, he kicked the door.

"Ford! Wait. What about the baby? I can't . . . can't just have it. I have to have a doctor."

"Something will come up. Leave me alone. I've got to find Raymond."

He left, running.

And, three weeks later:

The suspense was thick, and the baby was moving. Raymond used the comm gear and found the Federation ship. It was inside the planetary system, searching for inhabited planets.

Maria went into labor. Ford held her hand and cursed the doctor. His body had been found, a sharp knife embedded in the spine. Two dozen Euchrans had been slain before the workman confessed. The doctor had been fooling with his wife. He'd had to do something, hadn't he? A man had to have his self-respect. The Euchrans had been buried, and Raymond had apologized.

Maria was in pain, and drugs were no help. She'd been in pain for the last hour, ever since the water bag had broken. The baby moved and kicked, but he did not drop.

"Is it dead? Is it? I don't want it to be dead. Raymond. Is Raymond here? Let me talk to Raymond."

Ford patted his wife's hand. "I sent Raymond away. I don't want him here."

In between gasps of pain: "Not that . . . Raymond. Big Raymond . . . your brother. I want to see Raymond."

"He's . . . he's out in the fields. Something important came up."

"I want . . . him."

"I can't get him. You don't want me to leave?"

"Is he dead? Is the baby dead?

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Do you think so? Dead? I don't want it dead. I want Raymond . . . dead. Yes? Ford? *Ford?* Oh, my *God!* Make somebody help *me!"*

Ford made a decision. He told a woman to stay with Maria, then ran to the village, pumping his legs as if they were pistons. He stopped a boy and said, "Battai?"

The boy motioned, Ford ran.

He found his friend in a tiny hut. The Euchran stooped in greeting.

"My wife is ill. Having a baby. Do you people have a doctor?"

"Doctor?"

"One who aids the sick. One who makes them well."

Battai seemed puzzled. "You have need of this man?"

"Yes. My wife is dying. Our doctor is dead, and we cannot go for another. I need someone who can save my wife."

"I will see."

Ford followed Battai to another hut. It was the largest in the village. He'd noticed it often, but never been allowed near.

He waited impatiently, scuffing his feet in the dust, while Battai went inside. If Maria died, he intended to kill someone. Perhaps Raymond. Perhaps himself.

Battai stuck his head out the door and motioned Ford inside. A withered old man sat on a mat, his legs crossed. Euchrans had very brief lifespans, but this man was at least thirty.

"I am the communion priest. May I be of aid to you?"

"You speak English?"

"Only a little," Battai said softly. "I taught him. We are fast learners, but it would be best if you spoke through me."

Ford nodded. "Tell him that my wife is having a baby, and ask him for his help. Tell him that I'll do anything in return. Anything."

Battai spoke sharply to the priest. Ford had a slight knowledge of the Euchran language, but the sounds came too fast for him, one piling swiftly on top of the next. The priest answered Battai at length. Ford waited.

"What did he say?"

Battai stared at the bare floor of the hut. A six-inch coral reptile crawled toward the priest's thin legs. "He refused to help."

"But—but I'm your friend. Tell him how much I've tried to help you."

"He knows," Battai said. The reptile had reached the old man and mounted his right leg. "He says that he would like to help you, but cannot. He is a priest, not a doctor. We have no need for doctors. The priest does everything for us, but he cannot help you. It is because you are not Euchran, not in communion."

"Communion?"

"The priest is in communion now. He speaks with the hive. It tells him that he cannot help you. That is all."

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"I want a doctor," Ford said, "not a fortune teller."

"The priest is both." Battai held out both hands, palms up. "The priest also says you are our friend, but powerless. He says your brother is our enemy. He says you should let the child die, for it is not of your blood. It is your brother's child."

Ford started to swing. Not at Battai. Not at the priest. Just a swing. But he stopped.

"Tell the priest I'm sorry he won't help me. I could have helped him."

Ford rushed from the hut. Battai stopped him at the edge of the village.

"Ford—there are things I must tell you."

"I have to get to my wife. Leave me alone."

"You want to know why my people are dying?"

"Christ, yes. I've been trying to find out for a year. But not now."

"Now or never."

Ford took a long step, then stopped. "All right. Now."

Battai told him. He told him about the Rulyan, and about communion. He told him that without communion, the Euchrans would die, or go mad, or both. Battai did not beg or plead for help. At the end, he turned the palms of both hands toward the sky—a sign of forgiveness—then walked away.

Ford returned to Maria, walking slowly and thinking.

When he arrived, the woman stopped him at the gate. The baby had come. It was a boy. It was dead. Maria was fine. She was asleep.

Ford went into the hut and looked at the dead baby. He lifted it and turned it in his hands. He looked at the eyes, nose, mouth, and hands. Then he shrugged and carried the baby outside. He buried it in a mound of soft dirt.

And, the following week:

As soon as he found out about the children, Ford knew what he had to do. When he'd first heard, he hadn't believed it. One night, there were twenty-five children in the camp. The eldest was eleven, the youngest nine months. Now they were all gone. Raymond was one of them. His son.

Ford had no difficulty gaining entrance to the darkened interior of the comm shop. He was Raymond's brother, a powerful man, trusted.

The line to District Central was weak, but Ford made himself understood. He supplied them with Euchra's coordinates, and with a detailed description of the company's illicit activities. They promised him a reward, but he rang off, laughing. The call had cost him a minimum of fifteen million. And a brother. And a wife.

But it didn't seem to matter. He'd already lost a son. And a faith.

And, a final week:

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The ships had left, three of them, surrounded by a Federation escort, carrying the workmen, the machinery, and the bosses. All except one. Ford stayed behind, newly appointed Terran Liaison Agent for the planet Euchra. One man, alone among three million aliens. Alone except for twenty-five children, who ranged in age from eleven years to nine months.

The Euchrans had given him a hut, a big one. He kept his comm gear in the back and slept in the front.

He sent an initial report, then lay on a blanket, letting the crisp, artificial heat soothe his body. He thought about Maria and about Raymond—both Raymonds—and about communion.

He had a lot to learn. And a lot of time in which to learn it.

When Ford woke to the blistering heat of the Euchran dawn, he knew that it was time to tell a lie. He crawled carefully out of bed, trying not to wake Luvra, and went to the back of the hut. He called District Central and reported an unchanged Euchran situation. Afterward, he smoked a pipe of local tobacco and watched the natives through an open window.

After an hour, he went back to the front room. Luvra was awake. She'd set a breakfast for him. He sat down to eat and looked at her deep black eyes.

"Tensi been here yet?"

"He stuck his head in the door a few mintues ago. Said he'd be back."

"You're communing."

She nodded and raised one hand in the air. "Very much so."

"For my benefit?" The food was cold but crisp, all vegetables. There was little animal life in this area of Euchra, and meat was a luxury. The equatorial regions, on the other hand, were hot, steaming jungles, thriving with life of all kinds.

"I suppose you don't want to hear what the hive says."

"If I did, I'd go to a priest. His predictions are professional."

"Tensi is communing, too. That's why he wanted to see you."

Ford shrugged and continued eating. At last, giving up, he said, "Tell me."

"You should go."

"That's all?"

"If you go, you'll find the boy. At first, it will bring tragedy. The good will not appear for ten years."

"The good is for the hive, not for me. The tragedy will be mine."

"It does not say that."

"I've been here longer than you. I can read between the lines."

Tensi popped through the open door and grinned. He waved at Luvra and slapped Ford on the thigh. "Is she giving you the word?"

"I should go."

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"That's funny. I got the impression you should stay. It hinted at a great tragedy."

"That's why I go to a priest when I want an accurate reading. Not to an amateur."

"If I were back on the mountain, I'd get you something that would sizzle your ears. The magic up there is clear and crisp, fantastically strong. Maybe I ought to take the wings and fly up."

"Keep the wings under cover while they're here. You're not supposed to have them."

"They'll never have to know. I can be back in an hour."

"We're leaving in less than an hour."

Tensi raised a questioning finger. "Why so soon?"

"Why not? We've got nothing holding us back."

"Want me to go with you?"

Ford shook his head. "This is my responsibility."

"The desert is a terrible place without a friend."

"We won't be out that long. I'm heading for Battai's village."

"To let them see Jeremy?"

"Yes, and some of the others."

"It won't work. They'll still want to see the boy."

"We'll see," Ford said. "Luvra, you want to go with me?"

She nodded and followed Ford into the village. They met Elliot and Maria halfway to the clearing.

"I kept my part of the bargain," Elliot said. "The landing craft is back on my yacht. Now you better start doing your part."

"We can leave immediately."

"That's—that's fine. We have our equipment."

"I'll have to check it—to make sure it's properly primitive. I'll take care of food and water."

Maria was eyeing Luvra, who had a casual hand propped against Ford's hip. "Who's your friend?"

"She's my wife," he said, glancing quickly at her eyes in hopes of catching a reaction.

Maria squeezed her lips together and frowned. "I wish I'd known about her when I was trying to divorce you. It would have made matters considerably easier."

"Luvra's my fourth wife, and the best of the bunch. She's only five years old."

"Don't rub it in, Ford. I think I've made out better than you. If nothing else, Elliot has money."

Elliot looked vaguely disturbed. "Let's get our things together, Maria. We haven't time for private squabbles."

Maria shrugged and followed him away. Luvra turned to Ford and said, "Are all your women like this one?"

"I don't know," he said. "They weren't before, but things may have changed."

They headed east. The sun was directly above their heads, a savage white beacon in the cloudless gray sky, and they moved slowly, carefully, picking their way across

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the rocky ground. Ford led the group, a half dozen paces ahead of Maria and Elliot. There was little talk. Mostly they walked, looking at their feet, watching for rocks and reptiles.

After three hours, they halted at the foot of a sharp granite cliff. Ford turned to Maria and said, "There's a pass that goes around this, but it's difficult maneuvering. If you don't mind, we'll wait for dawn to try it. It's too hot now."

Maria shrugged, and Elliot said, "I'm agreeable. I want to rest my feet. To be honest, we're both a little out of shape."

Ford nodded and helped unload their gear. He removed three blankets and ignited a spontaneous fire. Maria and Elliot crowded near the flames. The sun had set, and the cold was creeping near.

Elliot looked at the fire and lifted an eyebrow. "Spontaneous fire? Isn't that an advanced article?"

"For the convenience of the agent," Ford said. "Quite legal. Look it up."

He stepped over the fire and walked to the edge of the light. Staring into the darkness, he ran a hand through his hair.

This will never work, he thought. Neither of them has the least conception of what this is all about. A whim brought them here—nothing more—a blank day on their heavy schedules. They'd get the boy, put him on their yacht, and ferry him home. They'd give him a month in which to adapt to the culture, then ship him off to school. During vacation, they'd let him spend a week at home. He could play in the yard and chat with the servants.

How could the situation ever be explained to a man like Elliot, a man with less awareness of the universe than a common Euchran reptile? It would be like trying to explain the inner workings of an interstellar drive to Tensi or Luvra. It would be hopeless. Totally and completely hopeless.

Ford sat on the ground and dropped his head into his hands. He felt the touch of a light hand on his shoulder and turned. He squinted and caught a fleeting glimpse of a shadowy figure.

"Yes? Who is it?"

Maria laughed sharply. "You mean you've forgotten my touch?" The shadowy figure sat at his side. "I've come to make peace, Ford. I'm sick of bickering. The past is dead—I want to try to forget it."

"That's fine with me," he said, staring again at the darkness. A minute of silence passed.

"Ford—what are you thinking about?"

"About Raymond."

"So am I. You'll find this hard to believe, but I really do want him back. I want him more than I've ever wanted anything in my life. I want him even more than I once wanted you."

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Had he been wrong? Had she indeed changed, after all? He asked, "Maria, do you remember the Rulyan?"

"Of course, Ford. The all-purpose herb which made us rich—then made us poor."

"Do you remember what it did for the Euchrans?"

"It was a drug; they were addicted to it. By harvesting it and shipping it off-planet, we were killing them. I always respected you for what you did. Perhaps you know that. But I never could see why you had to do it behind our backs. Raymond would have listened to you. I know he would have."

"I've never fully understood it myself. At the time, it seemed the right thing to do. The only thing to do."

"Raymond never forgave you."

"He's dead now?"

"Two years ago. Didn't you hear?"

"I received a message saying he was dead."

"It was very sudden—his heart, I think. He'd built another fortune, you know, despite the odds. But it killed him. He was forty-one."

"Were you . . . with him at the end?"

"No. I seldom saw him. We led our separate lives."

"I was told that the child who died was his, not mine."

"Whoever told you that was a liar." Her voice remained calm. "There was nothing between Raymond and me. Only friendship. And respect."

Ford stood. "Shall we go back to the fire? I don't want to make Elliot jealous."

She laughed and touched his hand. "Don't let that worry you. Our marriage is mostly a formality. Elliot and I are business partners, and the marriage simplified our operations."

"I see. But still, we should be heading back."

She started toward the fire, and he followed. Elliot sat near the flames, his head resting in his palms. Maria looked over her shoulder at Ford and said, "What was that about the Rulyan? We seem to have gotten away from it."

"It isn't important," he said. "I'll tell you later."

As they approached the fire, Elliot stood and waited for Maria. Ford dropped to the ground and crawled into his blanket. Listening to their soft whispers, he fell asleep.

At dawn, Ford led the party into the pass and over the granite hills. The sun was even brighter than usual that day, and progress was slow and difficult. It wasn't until three days later that the exhausted threesome reached the village. Ford entered the encampment first. Maria and Elliot dragged a half mile behind.

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Ford was known in the village. It was the nearest to his own, and he'd visited it often in the past. While still alone, he decided to talk to the village chieftain.

The chief was alone inside his hut. He was an old man, nearly thirty, and the fragile bones in his arms and legs afforded him little mobility. Ford entered the hut and raised an arm to indicate his sorrow at the intrusion. Then he sat at the old man's side.

"Greetings, Battai. It's been a while."

"Almost a full year, Ford. I'm sorry that I'm unable to welcome you properly. Age gives an old man few benefits. But tell me—what brings you here? I sense that this is more than a pleasure trip."

"Maria has come back."

"I expected as much. Jeremy has been making prophecies of doom for the last month. I wonder if she'll remember me."

"It seems unlikely. She's changed."

"Haven't we all? And I suppose she wants the boy?"

"Yes."

"Do you intend to find him for her?"

"Not if I can avoid it. That's why I brought her here. I want her to talk to Jeremy and the others. It's easier that way. It's too hard to explain in words."

"Jeremy is in communion now, but I'm sure that he'll see you later. It will be an interesting experience for him. I believe that he remembers Maria quite well. I'll have two huts put aside for you. There are only the two of you?"

"Three. Maria has taken another husband. But two huts will be sufficient."

"I see. For a race whose lifespan is so long, your people show a curious impatience. But I will have the huts readied."

Ford stood and raised a thumb. "I'll want to see the twins in an hour or so. I'd rather see Jeremy privately, at least at first. Can you arrange that?"

"Certainly."

"Then I'll see you later, Battai. Perhaps I'll bring Maria around to see you, if we have time."

"I would enjoy that."

Ford went outside. Maria and Elliot stood in an open space, fifty feet from the chief's hut. Ford went up to them and said, "We'll be given huts to use while we're here. They should be ready soon."

Elliot jabbed a finger at Ford's chest. "Is the boy here? That's what I want to know. Haven't you found out yet?"

"This is where I've seen the other children," Ford said. "I think it'll be helpful to talk to them."

"Then you still insist that you don't know where the boy is?"

"That's correct."

"In that case, shouldn't we be asking questions about him?"

Ford sighed. "I said I'd find

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him—and I will. But I'll do it in my own way."

"Maria is nearly dead on her feet, thanks to this hiking trip of yours. I don't want to kill her."

Ford started to say something, but Maria interrupted. "Elliot, for the first time in your life, please be quiet. Ford knows what he's doing. He's lived with these people for ten years. He knows them better than you know me."

Ford grinned and said, "Thank you, Maria. I'll see that you're sent some food immediately." He added, "To insure that you don't die on your feet."

Maria bowed at the waist. "And, thank you, dear."

A young Euchran approached and led them to their huts. They were middle-sized structures, situated together at the edge of the enclave. Ford asked Maria to join him in an hour, then went into his hut. He tried to sleep, but couldn't.

Elliot seemed in better spirits when he stuck his head through the door of Ford's hut. "What's this all about?" he said, then entered. Maria followed him.

"There are three children in this village," Ford said. "Two of them should be here shortly. You probably remember them, Maria. The Buckley kids."

"The twins? Doreen and Ted?"

Elliot sat gingerly on the dirt floor. "Do they know where Raymond is?"

"I'm working on that. I want you to talk to these kids and see what they're like."

Maria nodded. A native arrived a few minutes later with the twins. He led them into the hut and had them sit across from Maria. She stared at them with shocked disbelief. The children were in their late teens, but their wrinkled faces belonged to middle age. They were small and squat, their arms covered with thick, matted black hair. Except for their light skin, they were unmistakably Euchran.

Elliot glared at the children, then wheeled on Ford. "This has gone far enough. Just what the hell are you trying to prove? Who are these people?"

"They're who I said they were. Doreen and Ted Buckley—age nineteen. Ask them a question, if you want. They remember a little English."

Elliot continued to glare. Softly, Maria said, "Do you remember me?"

The male grinned. His teeth were yellow, a black gap in the upper row where two teeth were missing. "You're Maria. You knew my mother."

Elliot sighed. "Oh, Christ, Maria, can't you see what he's doing? He's brought us a couple of ringers—freaks."

"No, he hasn't, Elliot. I remember these. . . . kids."

"You haven't seen them in ten

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years. Besides, they sure as hell didn't look like this, did they?"

"No," she said, "they didn't." She looked questioningly at Ford.

He said, "I can't explain it, but I don't think they've changed as much as it seems. If you cleaned them up and cut their hair, they might look vaguely human."

"Are all the children like this?" Maria asked.

"Almost all that I've seen."

"Raymond?"

"I haven't seen him. If you're through with them, I'll let them go."

"I guess that would be best."

Ford took the children outside and returned. After a moment, Maria said, "Why hasn't this happened to you? You've been here as long as they have."

"They've been incorporated into the village. Initiated through a special ceremony. I haven't, and I'm still an outsider. These children aren't. Inside, they're completely Euchran. I warned you."

"You did."

"I'm sorry, but I felt you had to see for yourself."

"I understand."

"Do you want to continue?"

"I—I don't now. What do you think, Elliot?"

"I think we ought to talk about it, dear. Privately."

Maria nodded and got to her feet. "We'll see you later, Ford, after we've reached a decision."

After they left, Ford sat down and frowned. There was no question in his mind as to how Elliot felt. He would favor turning back. Ford had seen the look in his eyes when he'd realized the true situation. Elliot wouldn't say it openly, but he'd never allow a freak inside his house.

But Maria was a different matter. Ford had no idea how she felt. Did she actually love the boy? Was it merely a whim that had brought her here? How much had she really changed?

Ford waited an hour, then stepped outside. The sun had set, and it was cold. He pulled a wrap over his shoulders and headed across the encampment. He stopped before the largest hut, the one in which the communion priest resided. A guard was stationed outside the door. Ford stood in the sand and waited. At last, the guard said, "You may go inside."

The priest was human. Like the twins, he was old, dark, and small. But unlike them, he was clean, handsome, and well-groomed. He smiled at Ford and said, in English, "I heard about your confrontation."

Ford sat on a blanket. "I hope it works, Jeremy. I was married to Maria once. I don't want to hurt her."

"Is that why you haven't told her of the hive?"

"That's one reason, yes. When she first arrived, I intended to

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show her everything, knowing that she could never take it. But now I'm not so sure of myself. The more I see of her, the less hatred I feel. She hurt me once, but the past is dead."

"You may not have any choice."

Ford bit his lip. "I was afraid of that. What else does the hive say?"

"You haven't contacted it?"

"We were getting conflicting reports."

"From the priest?"

"I didn't see him. I wanted to talk to you first. I figured you'd be closer to Raymond."

"That may be true. I don't know. But it's not important."

"What is important?"

"The hive wants you to find Raymond. They want him out of the hive and off Euchra."

"Why?"

Jeremy sighed. "You know I can't tell you. Besides, I honestly don't now."

"But I do. The hive is restless. Even forty light-years away, Raymond will still be part of it, still in contact."

"I think you're wrong, Ford. I'm not allowed to tell you why, but I can tell you this much: A replacement has already been chosen for Raymond."

"You?"

"Fortunately, no. A boy further south. He's three, the same age Raymond was. His parents are both human."

"I never heard about this."

"You weren't intended to."

Ford shook his head. This was getting him nowhere. He decided to lay his cards on the table. "I still think I'm right," he said, "and I'll tell you this much—I don't intend to let it happen."

Jeremy looked momentarily agitated, then calmed. "Don't be absurd, Ford. The hive isn't going to conquer the universe merely because one part of it is replaced. I'm human, too, you know, at least to a degree. If I thought anything bad would come of this, I'd be right with you. But there's nothing to fear, nothing we can do. It isn't merely that the hive wants Raymond to leave; it has predicted it as well. I communed at the moment of prophecy. It was the clearest I've ever felt. There were no divergent paths—absolutely none. It will happen, Ford, and there's nothing we can do to stop it, even if we tried."

"I can refuse to lead Maria to the hive."

"That won't make any difference, and you know it. She'll find someone else."

"Her husband doesn't want to go. I'm not sure she does, either."

Jeremy shrugged. "We'll have to wait and see."

"You seem awfully sure of yourself. Tell me, have you ever known a prophecy to go wrong?"

"Never."

"I've wondered about that. Does

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the hive actually see into the future, or does it only control it? Either way, the hive is awesomely powerful. I don't want to see that kind of power let loose in the universe."

"The choice is not yours. The prophecy says that things will seem bad at first. The good will not appear for ten years."

"That's the same prophecy Luvra received. I didn't like it then." Ford got to his feet and took a tentative step toward the door. Then he stopped and turned. "When does the hive want us?"

Jeremy smiled. "I'll try to find out this evening. I'll let you know in the morning."

"And one other thing—try to find out about Raymond. I want him looking vaguely presentable for his mother."

"And for his father."

"For him, too."

When Ford got back to the hut, Maria was there. He'd taken the long way back, walking slowly, trying to think. He hadn't reached any decisions, but he now had a headache.

As soon as she saw him, Maria said, "We want to continue."

Ford sat on the floor and gripped his head. "I knew you would. I hope it wasn't too rough on you."

"Rough?"

"Elliot. I saw the way he looked. You can tell him that Raymond is in better shape than the twins."

She jumped. "You saw him?"

Ford shook his head. "The communion priest here is one of the children. I talked to him, and he promised to find out where Raymond is. He'll let me know in the morning. I want you to talk to him. He can explain things better than I can."

"Certainly. I'll be glad to." She sighed. "Then it won't be long now?"

"No, it won't be long."

Maria pulled herself to her feet and headed toward the door. She put a foot outside, then stopped. "Ford?"

He looked up. "Yes?"

"I want to thank you for all . . . for everything you've done."

"Wait until it's over," he said. "Thank me then."

She smiled, held it a moment, then left.

Ford woke at dawn, still tired, the taste of dry cotton in his mouth. He dressed hurriedly and went outside. The village was quiet and empty. He walked past the huts and into the bordering fields.

A handful of workers moved about, tending the tall red Rulyan plants. Other vegetation dominated the cultivated fields, which stretched for acres and acres in all directions, but it was the Rulyan which received the particular at-

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tention of the workers. A Euchran would rather starve than try to live without the communion plant, for the absence of the latter would kill him quicker and more painfully.

Ford walked past the workers and stopped in front of a mud hut, which was used by the supervisors as a rest area. In the early dawn hours, it was dark and empty. Ford leaned against the structure, resting his feet, and listened.

He'd been born on Earth and had lived there until he was eighteen, then gone to Tamatra for university training. Earth was a dead world, nothing but endless cities and crowded people. Tamatra, on the other hand, was alive with the constant hum of animals and insects, most of which had been imported from Earth to save them from extinction.

Euchra was like neither Tamatra nor Earth. It was alive, and yet dead. Except for the Euchrans themselves, the highest form of life on the planet was a twelve-foot reptile, nearly extinct, which lived in the equatorial jungles. There were a few insects, little marine life, and no mammals. It was a puzzle, one that might never be solved because of the Federation's strict quarantine policies. Planets containing intelligent life were rare enough, only five so far out of hundreds and hundreds of explored worlds. Euchra was only one of five, but it was different from the others. Different from anything, Ford thought. After ten years, I don't understand half of it. Not even the hive.

In the silence, Ford heard a noise—light feet squishing through thick mud. He lifted his eyes and saw Maria approaching through the fields. He waved and went to meet her.

"You're up early," he said.

"I wanted to slip away from Elliot."

"Did you tell him what I said?"

"I didn't get a chance. He was in pretty bad shape last night. I don't quite understand. I think he's jealous of you."

Ford pointed at the village. "Shall we go?"

"So soon?"

"A priest never sleeps."

They walked through the fields and into the village. A few Euchrans were stirring now, some heading toward the fields. Ford went to the priest's hut and waited. When the guard signaled, he led Maria inside.

Jeremy was seated on the floor, his arms and legs crossed. He smiled at Maria and asked her to sit.

"I remember you," he said. "I'm Jeremy Acheson. My father was a foreman. When I was nine, I had a tremendous crush on you."

"I—I remember you, too, Jeremy. You lived next door to us."

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"I hope my present status doesn't bother you. Perhaps Ford explained . . ."

"He did—sort of. At least you look like a human being."

"Unlike the twins? Yes, I'm in somewhat better shape. I'm afraid Ford tried to shock you. The twins have changed more than most of us. Physically, at least."

"And . . . Raymond?"

"I think you'll find him very human."

"You've seen him?"

"No one has seen him in more than a decade. Raymond's situation is a very unique one. Perhaps I ought to explain; that's what Ford wants me to do. He could tell you everything himself, but he'd rather I do it. I think he hopes I'll let some privileged information slip."

Maria glanced at Ford, then said, "Go on."

"You have heard of the hive?"

"Yes, I think I've heard of it. But I don't know what it is."

"The hive is our god, and Raymond is a part of it. Ten years ago, we humans were integrated into the Euchran race. It became necessary for us to have a representative in the hive. Raymond was chosen by lot, and he gladly accepted. It was quite an honor, you see. Not all of us can become a part of a god, not without dying first."

"The hive is actually the combined consciousness of thousands of living Euchrans," Ford said. "A gestalt. The priests, like Jeremy, are able to contact the hive through the use of the Rulyan. It affects their systems as a powerful drug, putting them into a nearly telepathic state. The hive is the most powerful mental force on Euchra, and it tends to blot out everything else. The Rulyan is also addictive. If a Euchran is deprived of it for more than a few days, he will die."

"That's a fair description," Jeremy said. "The hive has been with us forever. Its very origin is shrouded in mystery. But it is there, and it will always be there. The Euchrans believe that the hive is the first force, that it existed before everything else. Even before the Rulyan."

"Then Raymond isn't human," Maria said. "He's just part . . . part of this thing." She turned to Ford. "That's why you wanted me to go back. You knew about all of this."

"I knew it," Ford said.

"But you needn't worry," Jeremy said. "Raymond has already been separated from the hive; another human has taken his place. Raymond is completely himself again. He's waiting nearby to meet you. He may seem a bit distant at first. But you must remember to think of him as you would a small child. In truth, that's all that he is."

Maria listened, then turned to

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Ford. "What do you think I should do?"

"I think you ought to leave Raymond right where he is. I've told you that before, and I have my reasons."

"You sound like Elliot. Ford, Raymond is your son. Jeremy seems to think that nothing will go wrong."

"Jeremy," Ford said, "is a Euchran. I'm not. Raymond is a part of the hive, and the hive is more than it ought to be. Maybe it's a god—I don't know about that. But whatever it is, it scares the hell out of me."

"Raymond is not a part of the hive," Jeremy said quietly. "He is no more a part of it than Ford."

"Maria may believe that," Ford said, "but I don't."

Maria returned her attention to Jeremy. "I want to see him. As soon as possible."

"He is an hour's walk from here."

Ford said, "At the hive?"

"No. As I said, Raymond has nothing to do with the hive. He was brought here to meet you. My instructions are clear. Both of you must go to him. You and no one else."

"Can you tell me why?" Maria said.

"I don't know."

She looked at Ford. "Well?"

He sighed, then shrugged. "It's your decision. If you want me, I'll go."

"I want you." Then, to Jeremy: "Tell us where to find him."

Jeremy gave them the boy's location. Ford knew it, a tall hill, the highest of a chain, a place where the magic was strong.

Maria left to find Elliot. When he was alone with the priest, Ford said, "You lied to her."

Jeremy's face remained expressionless. "I did not."

"You gave the impression the boy would be normal. You know better than that. I call it lying."

"That's your opinion. If you felt so strongly, why didn't you speak when she was here?"

"I was afraid I'd exaggerate the difficulties. I wanted Maria to get the story from a neutral. I underestimated you. You're not a man any more. You haven't been one since you were initiated."

"Does it matter?"

"Perhaps not." Ford got slowly to his feet. "I'm going to show Maria the hive. I'll let her see Raymond first. Then I'll show her where he's spent the past ten years."

"Do you think it'll change her mind? It's dangerous at the hive. I think you ought to reconsider."

"I know a lot more about you people than you expect. I may not be a Euchran, but I'm married to one. I've been married to three others. I've had many close friends among you. I know the location of the hive, Jeremy, and I'm going there. With Maria."

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Jeremy shrugged. "As I said—does it matter? The prophecy has been made. You're wasting your time. We're all wasting our time. If we wait, if we do nothing, it will still happen. You can neither stop nor change it."

Ford went outside and waited for Maria. He felt as though he were a tiny animal caught in the center of a savage storm. In whatever direction he turned, the storm pushed him the opposite way, and whenever he tried to stand, the wind bowled him over.

Ford was afraid of the hive and, worse than that, he was afraid of his own son. Waiting for Maria, he knew that Jeremy was right. The prophecy had been made. The hive had never been wrong. It would happen.

When Maria arrived, Elliot was barking at her heels. She ran up to Ford, grabbed his sleeve, and said, "Tell him to go away."

Ford looked at Elliot and said, "Go away."

"Now wait a minute," Elliot said. "This has gone too goddamned far. I paid for this trip, and the boy is going to become my son. I have as much right as anyone to see him."

"You go out there with us," Ford said, "and Raymond won't be found. I can promise you that."

"What is all this? Maria came into the hut babbling about a hive and a mass mind and all sorts of weird junk. I want to know what the hell's going on. Won't anybody tell me?"

Ford pointed at the priest's hut. "Ask the man in there. He'll give you the word, if the guard lets you see him, which I doubt."

"I'm not going?" Elliot said.

Ford shook his head sadly. "I'm sorry. It's not my decision. This is the only way they'll do it."

"Oh . . . oh, all right. But make certain you let me know as soon as you get back. I have a right to know." Turning, he stomped gracelessly away.

Maria giggled. "He's jealous of you. He couldn't care less about Raymond—he told me so. He's mad because I spend so much time with you."

Ford glanced at her to see if she were joking. Then he said, "Are you ready?"

"That's a good question." She smiled warmly. "I suppose I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

"That's a good answer," he said.

They started out, marching slowly away from the village, into the fields, and past them. Ford arranged his step so that Maria had no difficulty keeping pace with him.

"This is like old times," she said. "You know, when we used to go for walks. And we're going to see Raymond, too. Ford, I almost wish . . ."

"Yes?"

"Oh. Oh, nothing." A long pause while they covered a hun-

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dred yards of rocky ground. Then: "Do you like it here?"

"Very much. It's different, certainly not for everyone, but I like it, yes."

"And that girl? Your . . . wife?"

"I like her, too." He smiled. "But it's not really a marriage. She just takes care of me. We can't have children."

"Can the others? Like Jeremy?"

"I don't know. They never have—not so far as I know. But perhaps they could. Ask Raymond when we meet him. He'll know."

It took them a half hour to reach the hill. Climbing it took twice as long. There was a narrow trail, but Maria moved slowly, stopping frequently to rest.

They were fifty feet from the top when Ford caught his first glimpse of the still figure that awaited them at the top. It was too far for him to see a face clearly, but he had the abrupt feeling that he was gazing upon himself. A younger version of himself, perhaps, but still himself.

At the next turn in the path, Maria saw the boy. She sprinted ahead, chattering furiously in her excitement, her attention focused on the figure ahead, not on her words.

When they reached him, Raymond smiled and said hello. The gesture was sufficient enough for Maria. She rushed forward, kissed the boy, and held him close. Ford stood behind them, studying Raymond, noting the accurateness of his earlier impression. Raymond did indeed look like his father. He was tall and gangly, his hair dark and short. He had Maria's strangely shaped nose, but the rest of him was all Ford. It was like seeing the boy born again, and Ford remembered the cluttered, noisy ward back on Tamatra. It was a memory that made him sad.

"Ford?" Raymond said, stepping away from his mother and approaching his father. The face was that of a thirteen-year-old, but the voice was many years older. "I understand you disapprove of me."

Ford shook Raymond's outstretched hand. "Let's say I have an open mind. Are you ready to go to the village?"

"Oh, yes. I'm looking forward to it. It's been such a long time since I've been with people. I feel almost as if I've just awakened from a long, horrible nightmare."

"Things will be better now," Maria said, stepping forward and taking his hand. "You're home again."

The sun reached its bright, afternoon savageness as the reunited family marched back to the village. Maria walked ahead this time, clutching tightly at Raymond's hand, talking ceaselessly, telling him everything that had happened to her in the last ten years.

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Ford walked behind them, alone, his feet mechanically following the path. It was with a sense of relief that he greeted the familiar appearance of the cultivated fields. He moved past long rows of Rulyan plants and saw Battai waiting ahead, lying on a makeshift stretcher, a small cluster of workers surrounding his form.

When Maria and Raymond reached him, they stopped, and the boy leaned over and spoke to the chieftain. Ford quickened his pace and as he drew close heard Raymond saying, ". . . good to be home, back among my own people again."

Battai looked away from the boy and smiled at Ford. "You promised to bring her to visit," he said. "Must I force your hand by squatting in the fields like a common worker?"

Ford smiled and crouched at the side of Battai's stretcher. "We've been very busy."

"So I've heard. Jeremy has been telling me of your activities—he seems to disapprove."

"He also thinks my efforts are useless." Then, pointing at Raymond, he added, "And it looks as though he's right."

Battai turned his head and looked at Raymond, as if seeing him for the first time. He stared at the boy for a long moment. Then, turning to Ford, he said, "You realize this isn't your son."

Maria gasped, shuffled closer to Raymond, and said, "Don't be ridiculous. I know you hate me, but why take out your spite on the boy?"

"I don't hate you," Battai said. "I'm much too old for hatred. In your years, I'm well over a hundred."

"And senile," Maria snapped. She grabbed Raymond's arm and pulled it. "Let's go to the village."

"No, wait," Raymond said. "Let the man say his piece."

"I have nothing to say," Battai said. "I merely feel that these people have a right to know what you are."

"And that is?" Ford prodded.

Battai turned his head slowly and looked at Ford. "This boy—this being—is not your son. He is the hive."

"Not any more," Maria said. "That's over."

"But it cannot be over," Battai corrected. "Ford, why haven't you shown her the hive? That would be proof enough, I think."

"I haven't seen it myself," Ford said.

"I—" Battai stopped. A figure was rushing toward them across the fields. "We have company?"

"It's Elliot," Maria said. "I hope he's not going to cause trouble."

But Elliot caused no trouble. He looked carefully at Raymond and seemed satisfied by what he saw. "I'm Elliot Winter," he said, sticking out a hand.

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Raymond caught the hand in a tight grip. "I'm very proud to meet you, sir. I understand you're one of the most important figures in the galaxy."

Elliot chuckled. "I wouldn't say that. I am an important figure on Tamatra, for whatever that's worth."

"And you're willing to take me in, even though you're not really my father? Isn't such selflessness remarkable anywhere in the universe?"

"I'm happy to do it," Elliot said, beaming. "I haven't any children of my own and, well, it's always been the major regret of my life. Now I have you, Raymond, and I'm hoping you'll be able to fill this hole in my life."

"I'd like to try," Raymond said.

And you'll have the opportunity. Why don't you come back to the village with me? We'll be leaving shortly, and I think we ought to get to know each other better."

Raymond nodded and compliantly followed Elliot across the fields. After a moment, Maria started off in pursuit.

"Maria," Ford said. "Wait a moment."

She turned and glared at him. "Forget it, Ford. It isn't any use. It's over now. You did what you promised, and I appreciate it. But leave us alone now. Please?"

When she was gone, Ford turned to Battai, who had been listening quietly. Ford said, "You can tell Jeremy that it's over. I've lost."

"He'll know," Battai said. "It's your own fault, Ford. You should have fought harder."

"What would have been the use? I couldn't have won. The prophecy had been made. It was over before it began."

"Perhaps so; perhaps not. I'm tired now, but I've fought the hive my whole life. I didn't win, but I tried. The hive has caused my people so much harm. Look at us, Ford, tilling the fields like so many advanced animals, smothered beneath the curse of the Rulyan. We could have had more, much more, but the hive hasn't allowed it."

"What you said earlier—about the boy. What did you mean?"

"You've never seen the hive, Ford; few people have. I'm one of the few. You see, the hive is not merely what it seems—it is much more than a collection of individual minds. When one becomes a part of the hive, one ceases to exist as an individual. It is very much like death—ego-death, if you will, the destruction of the individual consciousness. That boy is a construct, a combination of all the forces within the hive. It has happened before, whenever the hive has wished to have mobility, to walk as a man. You and I have both seen it. Raymond is not an individual. There is no separation from the hive, no more than your

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left arm could walk alone without the aid of the rest of your body."

"But Jeremy said—"

"Jeremy is a priest, a servant of the hive. I am not. I am a chieftain, a part of a silly group of old men with no more actual power than a three-legged insect. The hive rules our society; there is no place left for individual leaders. But we chieftains continue to exist, the end result of an ancient tradition that refuses to die. And we know many things about the hive, things no priest can ever know."

"Such as?"

"I'm sorry, Ford. I'm very tired. Tonight there will be a feast, a celebration for you and your companions. Speak to me there; perhaps I can help you."

Battai seemed to fade. His eyes closed, and he slept. Ford motioned to the workers, and four of them stepped over and lifted the stretcher. Ford followed them back to the village.

Ford arrived late for the feast. The fires were already burning, white reptile meat roasting over a dozen spits. He avoided the food. Meat was difficult to obtain and was usually consumed only during feasts. Ford had once sampled some, and he'd been sick for a week. This time, instead, he filled his plate with vegetables and ate sparingly.

Elliot had wasted little time. He'd called his landing craft, and it now sat at the edge of the clearing, ready to join its mother ship in the morning. The pilot had plunged happily into the feast, gulping down great chunks of meat and toying with a half dozen girls.

Ford moved about the gathering, stopping occasionally to eat, and talked with old friends. Neither Jeremy nor Battai had arrived yet, but Maria, Elliot, and Raymond crowded around one of the fires, talking loudly among themselves.

Ford waited until he had no other choice, then walked over and joined them. Raymond was speaking to Elliot: ". . . the most important figure in the whole world. I really admire you, sir. The most difficult of tasks is to lead men in directions they could never find on their own."

"Indeed it is, yes. I'm not even sure of my total worth, to tell you the truth, but it's easily in the billions. When we get back, I want to give you the opportunity of seeing the business close up. It's going to be yours someday, and I want you to know how to run it."

"What exactly do you do, sir?"

Elliot laughed heartily. "What don't I do? That would be a better question. We handle everything that's legal, and a lot that isn't. You're going to have to get some schooling first. It's really amazing how bright you are without the benefit of a formal education."

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"Why, thank you, sir. I'm trying my best to learn."

Maria sat slightly apart from the men, her chin cupped in her palms, a frown of boredom on her face. Ford scooted next to her and said, "I understand you're leaving in the morning."

Before she could reply, Elliot wheeled. "Yes, damn it, we're leaving, and I want to know why we have to wait. I'm happy to see the natives having some fun, but I don't see why we have to sit here and watch it. I'm a busy man with a full load of responsibilities, and I can't afford to waste this kind of time."

"It's a custom, sir," Ford said, "like stealing from the poor. The natives are under the impression they're honoring you. Were you to attempt to leave . . . why, they might scalp you, or burn you at the stake."

"Don't give me that. Answer me straight, or I'm leaving right now."

"I don't think you'll do that," Ford said. "Your pilot looks a bit under the weather, and I don't think you want to crash into the nearest mountain."

"We really do want to get home," Maria said soothingly. "I think you can understand, Ford. But I guess it won't hurt to wait until morning."

"I guess it won't," Ford said. He got to his feet. "I'm tired, and I'm going to bed. Don't bother waking me in the morning."

"Ford—" Maria started, as he walked away. But she stopped. Raymond turned to Elliot and resumed their previous conversation. Maria opened her mouth once more, then sat in silence.

Ford walked past the dancing, chanting Euchrans and thought about Maria. He had the answer for which he'd been searching: Nothing had changed between them. In the old says, they'd sometimes been good together, and they'd often been bad together, and now it was the same. Perhaps it would always be so.

He'd reached the first row of huts when Jeremy rushed past him, nearly stumbling in his haste. Curious, Ford turned around and followed him back to the fires. Jeremy went up to a group of Euchrans and began waving his hands in a furious manner. Ford walked up to the group and listened. When Jeremy saw him, he turned and said, "Battai is dead."

"But . . . but I just talked to him. Not more than three hours ago."

"I'm sorry, but . . ." raising both hands slowly, ". . . he's dead. I suppose it was bound to happen. Battai was an old man, very old, much older than any Euchran I've known."

"He was . . . going to tell me something tonight," Ford said. Then louder, "He was going to tell me about the hive."

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"What about the hive?"

"I don't know. He told me today he knew things no priest could ever know. He was going to tell me tonight and then . . ." He stopped suddenly as awareness crept in. Then, abruptly, he broke away from the group and raced between the fires. His vision dimmed and clouded as he approached tiny white figures, who bobbed and jerked and spun in the air. When he reached them, he stuck out a hand and pulled one of them erect.

"You killed him," he said, in Raymond's face. "You murdered Battai." His voice was tight and drawn. Over Raymond's shoulder, he saw Maria's white face highlighted against the crisp orange flames. "Killed him," he repeated. "Killed him because he fought you."

Elliot jumped to his feet and lunged forward, trying to push Ford away. Ford stepped aside, and Elliot tumbled past him. Over his shoulder, Ford said, "Don't get up. This is between Raymond and me. Stay out of it."

Maria was on her feet. "Ford—won't you explain?"

"Battai is dead. Raymond here—whatever he is—he killed him." Ford pulled on the boy's shirt. "Tell me," he said. "Tell me or kill me." He clutched the collar so tightly Raymond's boyish face turned a bright red. The whites of his eyes were glazed, and a thin trickle of saliva ran down his chin.

Maria reached out and lightly touched Ford's wrist. "Let him go, Ford. Please. He's only a boy. He didn't kill anyone."

Ford looked at her and shook his head. Slowly, he released his grip on Raymond's throat. He didn't look when the boy dropped heavily to the ground. Stepping over Elliot, he headed back to the village. Behind him, a babble of voices exploded, some Euchran, some not, but he didn't listen.

As Ford walked past, Jeremy took a hesitant step toward him, but faded quickly back into the shadows. Ford concentrated on staring straight ahead. He had only one thought: Break the prophecy. Break it into tiny little bits and scatter them across the whole planet until they rotted and rusted and turned to dust.

He went to his hut and drew his gear. He pulled out a gun, something he always carried but never used, and stuck it in his belt. He turned to the door and saw Maria.

He didn't know how long she'd been standing there. She walked into the room and sat on the floor.

"You're wrong," she said. "You don't know how wrong you are."

"I'm going to kill him," Ford said. "I don't think I have a chance—he'll kill me first—but I'm going to try. I've been living on this planet so long I've started to

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think like a native. I've had enough of fate and prophecies and sitting on my butt. I'm going to exercise my free will. I'm going to kill that thing."

"No," Maria said. "Raymond is the only thing I've ever had. You'll have to kill me first."

"What are you trying to prove?" Ford said. "Can't you find anybody else to leech on?" But he didn't try to push past her.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Isn't it obvious? I really thought you'd be the first to know. You want to know what kind of men you like? I'll tell you what kind of men you like: Men with power. When I didn't have enough to please you, you dropped me and went to my brother. When they broke him, you found somebody else—I don't know who—but somebody, I'm sure of that. Then, eventually you found Elliot, the man with the billions, and he must've seemed the answer to all your problems. And now it's Raymond. He's got so much power it runs out his nostrils and stains his shirts. And you want to share in that power, don't you? That's why you want him kept alive. You don't give a damn about him as a person. You can't. It's impossible. He's not human."

"Are you?"

"I . . ." He faltered. "I don't know."

"I do," she said. "You want me to tell you?"

"I want you to come with me to the hive."

"What?"

"That's right. To the hive. That's where I was going when you barged in here, and now I want you to come with me. Before he died, Battai told me I had to do it. He wanted to tell me something else too, but I'll never know what it was. Maybe I can find the answer at the source. I don't know. But I'm going to try."

"What about Raymond?"

"The hell with Raymond. Will you come?"

"No . . . yes. I'll do it. Ford, I . . . I'm afraid of Raymond. You're right about me—but not about Raymond. He's so powerful he scares me."

"That's powerful."

"Yes."

"Then let's get out of here." He pushed her gently toward the door. She tripped, stumbled, regained her balance, and ran straight into Raymond.

He'd grown. His body blocked the doorway, cutting off the light from the fires. He looked at Ford, then at Maria. He smiled.

Ford started toward him, then stopped. Three feet from the door, he stood without moving.

Raymond said, "What are you doing here, Mother? The feast is progressing delightfully. Both Elliot and I miss you very much."

Maria had stopped breathing. Now, starting again, she said, "I

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was just saying good-bye to Ford. That's all."

Raymond's smile broadened. "That's a very kind thing to do, Mother. Ford has been very good to us. It's unfortunate that we cannot spend more time with him."

"Yes, it is," she said.

"Then please come with me, Mother. Elliot is very worried about you, and it bothers me to see him worried. We don't want to worry him, do we?"

"No, we don't."

"That's right, Mother. Now would you please come along?" Raymond stepped out of the doorway, and Maria moved forward. He waited until she passed him, then followed her outside.

Ford jerked the gun out of his belt and sprinted to the doorway. He raised the weapon and aimed it, the barrel pointing directly at the center of Raymond's retreating back. He held the gun in place for a long moment. When Raymond disappeared from sight, he lowered it. He dropped it to the floor and kicked it solidly across the room.

He grabbed a jacket and went outside. Moving carefully, keeping always in the shadows, he edged past the glimmering fires. In a corner, he saw Maria, Elliot, and Raymond sitting in a tight circle, talking much as before. A few yards away, Jeremy conferred with a select group of Euchrans, undoubtedly choosing a new village chieftain. It would be an old man, Ford thought, someone only a few brief steps away from death. The position of village chieftain was a ceremonial one, a final honor bestowed on a well-liked man whose days in the fields had long since passed.

But it didn't matter.

The pilot was still enjoying himself at the festivities. Ford could hear his voice echoing from the distant corners of the clearing. He slipped into the landing craft and cast a studious look at the instrument panel. It had been ten years since he'd last flown one of these, and he only hoped that he remembered how. If he failed now, everything would be lost.

It was easier than he'd expected. The largest galactic manufacturer of landing and surface flying vehicles advertised them as simple enough for a three-year-old to operate. At thirty-three, Ford lifted the craft into the air. He set the directional finder for the hive and settled back to wait.

He tried to sleep. It would be a long journey, covering half a continent, and as long as the craft flew, Elliot and his family would remain stranded on the ground, unable to reach the sanctuary of their yacht. Perhaps when he returned, Ford would kill Raymond. He knew there had to be a way, and he intended to find it. At the hive.

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It was nearly dawn when the landing craft slid between two lonely trees and scraped the hard earth with its wheels. Ford woke instantly and squinted his eyes, trying to catch a glimpse of the darkened landscape. This was new territory for him. During his first years as liaison agent, he'd traveled extensively, attempting to see as much as possible of his new world. But he'd never come within a hundred miles of the hive. It was sacred ground, feared ground, and no one approached the hive unless directly summoned.

Ford waited until the sun flooded the sky with light, then climbed out of the craft. He looked around and saw the hill, a sloping expanse of vibrant green which seemed to float in the air, bobbing and rocking as if pushed by the wind. The hive was on the hill, he knew, and it was waiting for him. He stood still for a moment, watching and listening, then walked forward.

The colors were brighter here, and different. The greens were sharp, the reds distinct, and the browns seemed to glow with a curious inner strength. He heard sounds he'd never heard before, and the taste of clean air was sharp and crisp on his tongue.

He'd almost reached the foot of the hill when he saw the sign. It was printed in Old Euchran, an ancient script, long dead and nearly forgotten. Ford puzzled out the words, which seemed to read: *Sanctuary for the Hopelessly Ruined.* It wasn't a message to gladden his heart. He glanced again at the sign, hoping to find something else, then moved to climb the hill.

The hive contacted him.

It reached deeply into his mind, moving swiftly, taking that which it wanted and leaving something else in its place. When Ford thought a question, he was answered—or ignored.

"What are you?"

"The hive."

"What do you want with me?"

". . ."

"What is the meaning of the sign?"

"The sign means what it says. You have read correctly. The hive is those who are hopelessly ruined."

And Ford was given the story, not in words, but in pictorial flashes, like a slide-show. He saw the Euchrans as a strong and proud race, controlling half the galaxy. He saw the race decline and wither until only widely separated colonies remained, one of which was on Euchra. He saw the use of the telepathic drug Rulyan become popular and saw homes established for the treatment of the hopelessly addicted. He saw one of these homes merge and combine and become the hive, and he saw it enter the minds of all addicts and become something

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more than itself until it discarded its bodily forms as useless relics.

"Is the hive immortal?"

"Immortal in the sense that it can never die."

"Is that what Battai wished to tell me?"

"Battai would have told you of the sign; that much he knew. It amused him to know that the hive was a collection of mental patients."

"Did you kill Battai?"

"All that lives eventually dies."

"Did you cause him to die as he did?"

". . ."

"Are you going to kill me?"

". . ."

"Why won't you answer?" Ford groped for safety as the hill danced before his eyes, quivering as if jerked by a thousand mighty strings.

Desperately, he tried: "Raymond?"

More pictures: Raymond gliding past the stars; walking in the Tamatran twilight; gazing upon his mother's face; seeing the still blue Earth floating alone in space.

"Is Raymond my son?"

Not a picture, but a gentle touch, and he felt Raymond exist as a part of the hive.

"Then the Raymond I have seen—he is not my son?"

"No, he is the hive."

"Why are you releasing him?"

In words and pictures: The joining of Raymond to the hive. The discovery of mankind's drive to expand and conquer. A fear of humanity. A desire to learn more than could be learned from a three-year-old child.

"Then you only wish to observe us?"

"We wish to understand."

A sudden idea—perhaps an answer. "Take me into the hive. I know much of mankind."

In answer: A blaze of emotion—the hive fears Ford.

"Then what will happen?"

"Raymond will observe, and if necessary, he will act."

"Act in what way?"

". . ."

"You make predictions, and you're never wrong. You must know the future."

"The hive can sometimes see into the future, but it is dim and misty and never certain. In this case, we do not look. We wait."

"Do you know what will happen to me?"

"We know, but it does not matter. It will happen."

"I want to know."

"You shall."

And then the hive left, departing as swiftly as it had come.

Ford opened his eyes. He saw the sign, and he saw the hill, now at rest, its rich colors fading into the landscape.

He went back to the landing craft, lifted it, and set the directional finder for home. He crawled into the back and opened a

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portable cot. He slept uneasily, but he slept.

When he opened his eyes, the craft was on the ground. He saw dim figures moving around the ship, pounding heavily on its sides. He climbed out of the cockpit and stretched. To Elliot he said, "It's all yours. I'm through with it."

"Just what the hell were you trying to prove? I ought to report this."

Ford shrugged and said, "Go ahead, if it'll make you feel better." He went over to Maria and said, "Battai was right."

"How do you know?"

"I went to the hive—alone. I . . . talked to it."

"And it said?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"I—" She looked at Raymond, who, with Elliot, was inspecting the landing craft. Turning back to Ford, she shook her head. "It won't make any difference. I'm going with them."

"I know that," he said. "And I—I wish you luck."

"Thank you, Ford—for everything."

He turned and walked away, leaving the three of them alone in the fields, gathered around the landing craft, like refugees from some great disaster.

Ford spent a day and a night in the village, then began the long trip home. He walked the entire distance, and it took him three days and three nights. When he reached the village, exhausted, dead on his feet, Tensi and Luvra met him.

"Did it work out?" Luvra asked.

Ford shook his head and said, "I have to go."

"With them?"

"They're gone. I'm going after them."

"You found the boy?"

"I don't know." He handed her a message he had composed on the journey and asked her to send it immediately. She read the note, nodded her head, and left.

"Your resignation?" Tensi said.

"Yes."

"You're irreplaceable, you know. Anyone else won't be the same. He'll be an alien. You're not."

"I'm going to become one," Ford said. "On my own world, among my own people. I'll be an alien there."

"I think I understand. You don't want to leave, do you?"

Ford shook his head. "Could I—could I borrow your wings?"

"You'll have to take them when you leave."

"No, you keep them. Just don't let the new liaison agent see you flying around the countryside."

"I'll be careful." Tensi smiled, then left to fetch the wings.

Ford flew to the mountain. His muscles ached and the wind was stiff, but he reached the peak and sat at the side of the still pond. He

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looked at the water, then at the sky.

In four days, perhaps five, the ship would come for him, and he would leave. Someday he would return, for Euchra was the only home he'd ever truly known, and he loved it more than he could ever fully realize.

But he knew that he had to go to Tamatra, and he knew that he had to keep the watch. Raymond was his responsibility, his and his alone. This was to be his final exercise of free will, he decided.

And—looking again at the sky—he knew hope, for the hive was older and wiser than mankind, and perhaps the conflict would never come. Perhaps man could learn from the hive and grow.

The good will not appear for ten years, Ford remembered. Ten years, a decade. He had a long wait ahead of him. A long wait.

And he'd still not found his son.

F&SF WINS HUGO AWARD

The World Science Fiction Convention has presented **Fantasy and Science Fiction** with the Hugo award for best science fiction magazine of the year. The awards were presented at the convention's 28th annual meeting in Heidelberg.

This is the sixth time the magazine has won the award and the second consecutive year.

Other Hugos were awarded to authors Ursula LeGuin, Samuel R. Delany and Fritz Leiber, the latter for his novella, "Ship of Shadows," from the July 1969 issue of F&SF.

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WINTER CITY

by Sonya Dorman

1

A bundle of backyards:
Old stems crossed,
fig trees in burlap.
Frost takes the legs
on the laundry line;
rigor mortis takes them later.
The last flock turns
in the sky like a delta wing
of knife blades.

a.

We regret to report
the sun has gone out.
Astronomers work on
the problem now. .
First effects were noted
this morning at 5:23
when the sun did not appear;
temperature twenty degrees,
wind northeast. At noon
the city lies in a blaze
of artificial light.

2

The sailors on Bone Street launch
their faces, carry dimes and grins
for the girls.
With their backs to the wind
they picket our coast with watches,
beer bottles, dreams of torpedoes.
A Navy of coins and grins invades us
while papers float

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through overhead grids, bums' corner,
boys' alley.
From the back of town snow wanders.
Winter deposits dirty crystals
in our wake.

b.

Our reporter in the field,
Joe Smoke, discovered the chimneys
have stopped whispering.
Across the river
where our produce is grown
the farmers formed a Collective
that will fly to Washington,
demand light for our wheat.

3

Port of northern drifters,
Christmas lights, cold turkey,
and the cops turning blue,
this is our country and cradle
where we were baptized with sleet.

Imported gunman in your platinum
helmet, you're crookt on the trigger
while we pirouette in expectation
of the blast.
Accomplices, we surprise you
with our bleeding stones.
How's it to come to our town
and find stores full of flowers
the color of old wounds?

c.

During an interview Dr. Gruntly
says we must keep our switches on.
He says the current must continue
to flow. It may be part
of the regular solar cycle.
The situation in static.
We'll have more information

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tomorrow. We mustn't panic.

4

The stranger was ramshackle,
beard like a shingle, eyes
full of cobwebs.
He was an old house;
for years we forgot to open
his door.
"Another one," the cops said,
hauling off the corpse.

Did he dream that rigged
like a ship he'd float
in a gallon jug? Did his soul
dream, seeing the old fool
laid out without buttons?

He was a worn house
sunken into its cellar;
when nobody lived in him
we knew he was dead.

d.

The birds should have returned.
Unlocked, unlighted, liquor stores
smell of nothing better than varnish.
Smokes obscure the harbor
and the dories are overturned
on shore like empty cradles.

5

(all the chimneys have stopped)

the sky flies away with hair shirts
on the other side of the world
where people fall down and wither

(there is still hope in many quarters)

an old man swims through the alley

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weak as a frog through soft debris
charcoal falls from his nape

(we will legislate against it)

the girl sits in her silver cage
her broken fingers hang like stems

(we'll have more information tomorrow)

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HOT WATER

by Isaac Asimov

ONE OF THE OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS OF popularizing the scientific view of the Universe for the general public is the occasional collision with readers who prefer some variety of religious view of the Universe instead. To reduce some wonderful phenomenon from the provenance of God to the blind consequence of some physical or chemical "law" offends them, and their response, very often, is to accuse the science writer of atheism.

Thus, only yesterday, I received a letter from a lady which began by addressing me austerely as "Dear Sir," and then continued, somewhat less austerely, "According to the Scriptures, and using the language of the Scriptures, you are a 'fool.' "

That aggrieved me, naturally, since while I am every bit as foolish (on occasion) as the next fellow, I hate to be told so. Besides the accusation went beyond that of mere folly. It was obvious that the lady was referring to a certain well-known Biblical quotation.

Among the hundred and fifty poems in the Book of Psalms, there are two, the 14th and the 53rd, that are virtually identical, and in each case the first verse begins, "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God."

What could I do? I decided that a Scriptural reference deserves a Scriptural reference, so I sent the nice lady a short note which said:

"'. . . whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.' Matthew 5:22."*

*This is from the Sermon on the Mount, in case you don't recognize it.

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But alas, having taken care of one correspondent, I must now run the risk of offending others of those whom Robert Burns would refer to as the "unco guid." For, you see, water has amazing properties that seem to be perfectly designed for life. It would be so pious to look upon it as the workings of a benevolent and ingenious Maker, creating a Universe for the good of undeserving Man, and so prosaic to bring it down to the uncaring properties of atoms.

—Yet I will have to do the latter, since I am committed to the scientific view of the Universe (pointing out to the reverent that they can easily suppose those uncaring properties to have been created by God).

In last month's article, I pointed out that water was the only possible thalassogen for a planet at the temperature of the Earth, the only compound that could possibly exist in sufficient quantity in the liquid phase to form an ocean.

To be liquid at the relatively low temperatures of Earth (I explained last month) a substance would have to consist of covalent molecules; that is, molecules in which pairs of neighboring atoms more or less share electrons in neighborly fashion, rather than carrying through a transfer of one or more electrons from one atom to another, bodily.

In general, the larger the molecular weight of a covalent compound, the higher the temperature range of its liquid phase. From that standpoint one might expect a substance which is liquid at water temperatures to have a molecular weight of perhaps 180. The molecular weight of water, however, is 18, just one-tenth of what it "ought" to be. On the basis of molecular weight, liquid water is surprisingly warm; it is "hot water" indeed.

But why is that? Are we perhaps over-simplifying if we relate liquid-phase temperatures to molecular weight alone?

Well, at the end of last month's article I listed molecular weights and boiling points without any attempt to pick and choose among them. That is probably unfair, for substances are made up of different elements, and these differ greatly among themselves in chemical and physical properties. Yet elements exist in families, and within these, the members are quite similar. It might be best to stick to members of a particular family and see what regularities we can find there.

For instance, consider the six elements of the noble gas family, their atomic weights, and their boiling points (see Table 1).

Here we have a smooth rise in boiling point with the atomic weight, which is what we would expect, looking at the matter in an unsophisti-

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Table 1

Element	*Atomic Weight*	*Boiling Point (° K.)**
Helium (He)	4.0	4.2
Neon (Ne)	20.2	27.2
Argon (Ar)	39.9	87.4
Krypton (Kr)	83.8	120.2
Xenon (Xe)	131.3	166.0
Radon (Rn)	222.0	211.3

cated way. After all if the atoms grow heavier, it takes more energy in the form of heat to lift them away from each other and send them off separately in vapor form.

What if we shift to the four elements of another family, the halogens, a family as well defined as that of the noble gases (see Table 2).

Table 2

Element	*Atomic Weight*	*Boiling Point (° K.)*
Fluorine (F)	19.0	85.0
Chlorine (Cl)	35.5	238.5
Bromine (Br)	79.9	331.9
Iodine (I)	126.9	457.5

Here, too, the boiling point rises smoothly with the atomic weight. There is a fifth halogen, the last in the series, which is named "astatine." It is a radioactive element, and even its most long-lived nuclear variety (with an atomic weight of 210) has a half-life of but 8.3 hours. It has not yet been obtained in quantities large enough to allow a clear boiling-point determination, but I am willing to bet, sight unseen, and any reasonable sum, that its boiling point is somewhere in the neighborhood of 570° K.

While the progression is smooth within an element family, observe what happens when we cross the line. Compare Tables 1 and 2. Neon and fluorine are not very different in atomic weight, but fluorine's boiling point is three times as high as neon's. This goes all the way down, each halogen having a boiling point approaching three times that of the noble gas with similar atomic weight.

**"°K." represents the absolute scale of temperature with the zero point ("absolute zero") at −273.16° C.*

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Is it that atomic weight alone isn't the sole deciding factor? Of course not. There are other properties that play a role. The noble gas atoms are chemically inert and do not combine among themselves. They remain as separate atoms. The halogen atoms, on the other hand, because of their characteristic electron arrangements (different from those of the noble gas atoms) do combine in pairs. Fluorine is not composed of individual atoms as neon is, but of molecules made up of two atoms apiece. Fluorine is F_2 and its molecular weight is 38.0. To consider the energy required to separate the fundamental particles of fluorine liquid into vapor, one ought to consider the weight of the molecule, not that of the atom. The molecular weight of fluorine is about that of the atomic weight of argon, and, sure enough, the boiling point of fluorine is about that of argon.

If we could stop there, we'd be able to work up a hard and fast relationship between particle size (whether atomic or molecular) and boiling point. In science, though, it isn't fair to stop at any point where you find yourself with the answer you want. You have to be sporting enough to look further and try to spoil your own hypothesis.

That's not hard to do. Chlorine atoms combine by twos also, and chlorine is Cl_2, with a molecular weight of 71. That is distinctly less than the atomic weight of krypton, and yet the boiling point of chlorine is just twice that of krypton.

So we had better not try to cross the family lines in working up our theories. For the rest of the article I will stick to families, and it will only be anomalies within the families that will receive our attention.

But let's see, is it only the boiling points that vary smoothly with atomic (or molecular) weight? Is the variation always direct, so that the measure grows larger as the weight goes up? Let's consider a third well-marked element family, that of the "alkali metals" and take their melting points this time (see Table 3).

Table 3

Element	*Atomic Weight*	*Melting Point* (° K.)
Lithium (Li)	6.9	452
Sodium (Na)	23.0	371
Potassium (K)	39.1	337
Rubidium (Rb)	85.5	312
Cesium (Cs)	132.9	301

Cesium's melting point is down to 301° K. or 28.5° C., which

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means that it will melt on a hot summer day. There is also a sixth alkali metal, francium, which is radioactive, with its most long-lived nuclear variety (atomic weight, 223) having a half-life of only 21 minutes. Its melting point has not been determined, but you can bet that it is very likely about 290° K. and that it will melt on a balmy spring day.

Other properties of other kinds vary in this regular fashion with atomic weights within element families, with values sometimes moving steadily upward and sometimes steadily downward.* The next question is, though, will this same sort of happy effect work within families of compounds—that is, substances with molecules made up of more than one kind of atom.

Consider molecules made up of carbon and hydrogen. These come in many varieties because carbon atoms can link together in chains and rings. Suppose, then, we consider a single carbon atom combined with hydrogen; a chain of two carbon atoms combined with hydrogen; a chain of three carbon atoms, four, and so on. The longer the chain the larger the molecular weight, and we can consider such a series of progressively larger molecules of very much the same kind to make up a family. What happens to the boiling point, in that case? (See Table 4.)

Table 4

Compound	*Molecular Weight*	*Boiling Point* (° K.)
Methane (CH_4)	16.0	111.7
Ethane (C_2H_6)	30.1	184.5
Propane (C_3H_8)	44.1	228.7
Butane (C_4H_{10})	58.1	273.7
Pentane (C_5H_{12})	72.2	309
Hexane (C_6H_{14})	86.2	341

As you see, boiling point rises smoothly with molecular weight in this case.

To be sure, the family of "hydrocarbons" considered in Table 4 is one in which all the members have molecules made up of the same elements. Would it be possible to set up families in which at least one of the elements changes from member to member?

Thus, carbon is the first member of an element family of which the next three, in order of increasing atomic weight, are silicon (Si), ger-

**It is only fair to say that a rigidly steady variation is not always found. There are exceptions. However, modern chemists can usually account for them, and we will have an example later in this article.*

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manium (Ge), and tin (Sn). An atom of each of these higher members can combine with four hydrogen atoms to form well-known compounds (silane, germane, and stannane, respectively) analogous to methane. Table 5 shows what happens to the boiling points there, and you see we get regularity in such a family, too.

Table 5

Compound	*Molecular Weight*	*Boiling Point (° K.)*
Methane (CH_4)	16.0	111.7
Silane (SiH_4)	32.1	161.4
Germane (GeH_4)	76.6	184.7
Stannane (SnH_4)	122.7	221

The problem, then, of finding out why water has the high liquid-range temperatures it has, may become easier to handle if we work within some family of compounds that includes it.

Water molecules are made up of hydrogen and oxygen atoms (H_2O). Of these two elements, hydrogen is a loner and is not part of any clearly defined family (though it has certain relationships both to the halogens and to the alkali metals). Oxygen, on the other hand, is the first member of a family that includes sulfur (S), selenium (Se), and tellurium (Te) as later members. An atom of each of these three can combine with two hydrogen atoms to form molecules (H_2S, H_2Se, and H_2Te, respectively) that are analogous in structure to water molecules (see Table 6).

Table 6

Compound	*Molecular Weight*	*Boiling Point (° K.)*
Water (H_2O)	18.0	373.2
Hydrogen sulfide (H_2S)	34.1	213.5
Hydrogen selenide (H_2Se)	81.0	231.7
Hydrogen telluride (H_2Te)	129.6	271.0

If we look at the last three members alone, we see that the boiling point goes up with molecular weight. *But water doesn't fit!* Its boiling point should be, judging from the rest, something like 200° K. or -73° C. Only the coldest polar days should suffice to liquefy its vapor and yet here it is, boiling something like a hundred seventy degrees higher than it should. Hot water, indeed.

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There are two other compounds that, like water, don't fit their families in this respect.

A hydrogen atom will combine with one atom of any of the halogens. We can get hydrogen fluoride (HF), hydrogen chloride (HCl), hydrogen bromide (HBr) and hydrogen iodide (HI). The boiling points of the last three on the absolute scale are 188.2, 206.5 and 237.8 respectively. We might expect HF to have a boiling point of about 170, but it doesn't. Its boiling point is 292.6, or about a hundred twenty degrees "too high."

Then, too, three hydrogen atoms will combine with one atom of the member of a family of elements that includes nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), arsenic (As) and antimony (Sb). The compounds phosphine (H_3P), arsine (H_3As) and stibine (H_3Sb) have boiling points of 185.5, 218 and 256. On that basis, the first member of the series, ammonia, H_3N, ought to have a boiling point of about 150, but it doesn't. Its boiling point is 239.8, which is about ninety degrees "too high."

What, then, do these three too-high-boiling compounds, water (H_2O), ammonia (H_3N) and hydrogen fluoride (HF), have in common?

1) All three are made up of molecules consisting of hydrogen atoms and one other kind of atom.

2) The other atoms involved, oxygen, nitrogen and fluorine, just happen to be the three most electronegative atoms there are; that is, the atoms most capable of snatching electrons from other atoms.

A fluorine atom, the most electronegative of all, can, for instance, take an electron away from a sodium atom altogether, assuming sole ownership and leaving the sodium atom utterly minus one electron.

The hydrogen atom is not quite such an easy mark. It holds on to its single electron more tightly than the sodium atom does to its one outermost electron. The fluorine atom does not take hydrogen's electron away altogether, but it does take over the lion's share of it. The electron, so to speak, is closer to the center of the fluorine atom than to the center of the hydrogen atom.

This means that if you imagine a line drawn down the center of the hydrogen fluoride molecule, with the hydrogen atom on one side and the fluorine atom on the other, the fluorine side, having more than its equal share of electrons, has what amounts to a small negative electric charge, while the hydrogen side has an equally small positive electric charge.

Much the same can be said of the water molecule and the ammonia

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molecule. In each case, the side of the hydrogen atom carries a small positive charge, while the side of the oxygen (or nitrogen) atom carries a small negative charge.

All three molecules are "polar molecules." That is, they have poles at which electric charge is concentrated.

This is not true of H_2S, for instance, which is otherwise so similar to H_2O in structure. Sulfur just isn't as electronegative as oxygen, and it cannot hog more than its fair share of the electrons of the hydrogen atoms. Hydrogen sulfide is therefore not particularly polar. Neither is hydrogen chloride or phosphine.

If we now consider polar molecules, those with a positively-charged end and a negatively-charged end, we must inevitably start thinking of the possibility of attraction between molecules. What if the positively-charged end of one molecule should be near the negatively-charged end of another molecule of the same kind? Would they not stick together a bit?

Yes, they would, particularly since the positively-charged end involves the hydrogen atom. Why? Because the hydrogen atom is the smallest of all the atoms and its center can therefore be most closely approached. The strength of attraction between two oppositely-charged objects varies inversely as the distance between them. The closer they come together, the stronger the attraction.

It follows, then, that the water molecule, the hydrogen fluoride molecule, and the ammonia molecule, are "sticky molecules." They tend to line up positive end to negative end, and it takes significantly higher temperatures to pry them apart than if they were non-polar; that is, lacking the concentration of charge on two opposite sides, and held together only by the Van der Waals forces mentioned in last month's article.*

Usually, the water molecules are pictured with a hydrogen atom attached to the oxygen atom of its own molecule by a solid bond representing an ordinary chemical linkage, while it is attached to the oxygen atom of a neighboring molecule by a longer dashed bond to indicate the electromagnetic attraction of opposite charges.

Because the hydrogen atom is thus between two oxygen atoms, one of its own and one of a neighboring molecule (or, in similar fashion,

*Van der Waals forces are also the result of electrical asymmetry in atoms and molecules, with momentary concentrations of electric charge in one place or another. In non-polar molecules, however, the concentration-shifts from place to place lead to overall polarizations that are tiny indeed, much less than those in polar molecules where the concentration of charge is persistent and definitely localized.

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between two fluorine atoms, between two nitrogen atoms, between a nitrogen atom and an oxygen atom, and so on) the situation is commonly referred to as a "hydrogen bond."

The hydrogen bond is only about one-twentieth as strong as an ordinary chemical bond, but that is enough to add up to one hundred seventy degrees to the temperature required to tear the molecules apart and set the liquid to boiling. Water molecules are sticky enough, thanks to the hydrogen bonds, to boil at 373° K. instead of 200° K. and that, combined with the fact that hydrogen and oxygen are the two most common compound-forming atoms in the Universe, makes it possible for oceans of liquid to exist on a planet the temperature of the Earth.

What's more, it is because of the stickiness of the water molecules that it is possible for water to absorb so much heat for each degree rise in temperature or give off so much heat for each degree fall. We say, therefore, that water has an unusually high "heat capacity."

There is, similarly, an unusually high heat absorption at the melting point or boiling point, due to the necessity for breaking all those hydrogen bonds. That is, it takes much more heat than one would expect to convert ice at 273° K. to water at the same temperature, or to convert water at 373° K. to steam at the same temperature. Working in reverse, an unusual amount of heat is given off when steam condenses to water or water freezes to ice. (Water has an unusually high "latent heat of fusion and vaporization" in other words.)

This is more than a mere matter of statistics. Water acts as a huge heat-sponge. It takes up and gives off more heat than any other common substance for a given change of temperature, so that the ocean rises in temperature much more slowly under the beating rays of the Sun than the land does, and drops in temperature much more slowly in the absence of the Sun.

With a vast ocean of water on its surface, the Earth therefore has a much more equable temperature than it would without it. In the summer, the sluggishly-warming ocean acts as a cooling device; in the winter, the sluggishly-cooling ocean is a warming device. And if you want to see what that means in a practical sense, consider the temperature ranges over the day-night interval and the summer-winter interval of land areas far from any ameliorating stretch of ocean (North Dakota) with one that is surrounded by ocean on all sides (Ireland).

Since at any temperature, the evaporation of water absorbs more heat per gram of vapor formed than is true of any other common liquid, water is a particularly cheap and effective air-conditioning device.

Perspiration is almost pure water, and as it evaporates, a great deal of

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heat must be absorbed from the object closest to that water—which happens to be the skin on which the perspiration rests. In this way, the body is cooled.

Then, too, there is the matter of solvent properties. In a substance like sodium chloride (common salt), the sodium atoms lose an electron each to the chlorine atoms, which therefore gain an electron each. The sodium atoms carry a unit positive charge, and the chlorine atoms a unit negative charge, and are hence called ions. The two sets of ions cling together through the attraction of opposite charges.*

When particles of salt are dumped into water, the presence of positive and negative poles on the water molecules sets up an electromagnetic field which tends to neutralize that which is set up by the charged sodium and chloride ions. The ions cling to each other with far less verve in the presence of water than in the open air and have a pronounced tendency to fall apart and go swimming in the water on their own. To put it briefly, sodium chloride dissolves in water.

So do a surprising variety of other electrovalent compounds; that is compounds made up of oppositely-charged ions after the fashion of sodium chloride.

Polar compounds, which are not built up of outright ions, but have molecules with separated concentrations of charge (like water itself), also lose a considerable part of their tendency to cling together in the presence of water and therefore tend to dissolve. This includes many common substances of importance to life, which have the oxygen-hydrogen or nitrogen-hydrogen linkage that makes polarization possible.

This includes various alcohols, sugars, amines, and other organic compounds.

No other liquid is so versatile a solvent as water; no other liquid can dissolve appreciable quantities of so wide a variety of substances. To be sure, though, water cannot dissolve appreciable amounts of all electrovalent compounds, since electrovalency is not the only property that is important. And, of course, it cannot dissolve non-polar compounds such as hydrocarbons, fats, sterols, and so on.

The importance of water's versatile solvent action is this:

The body's most important substances, the proteins and the nucleic acids, together with its most important fuels, the starches and sugars, are loaded with oxygen-hydrogen and nitrogen-hydrogen linkages and, if not polar altogether, have important polar regions within their molecules. Such compounds can therefore dissolve in water or, at least, can

The sodium chloride combination is much more polar than the water molecule is, and this is reflected in its extremely high boiling point.

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attach water molecules intimately to various portions of their structure and undergo changes in connection with these attached water molecules.

In short, the body's chemistry can go on against the intimacy of a water background. This background is so essential to life as we know it, that life could only have reasonably begun in the ocean, and now, even where it has adapted itself to dry land, the tissues remain approximately 70 per cent water.

So consider water. Consider its high liquid-range temperatures, its capacity to act as a temperature-ameliorating heat-sponge and as an efficient air-conditioner, its ability to dissolve a wide variety of substances and, therefore, to act as a medium within which the reactions necessary to life can proceed*, and you may well say, 'Surely, this is no accident. Surely water is a substance that has been carefully designed to meet the needs of life."

But that is placing the cart before the horse, I'm afraid. Water existed, to begin with, as a substance of certain properties, and life evolved to fit those properties. Had water had other properties, life would have evolved to fit those other properties. If water had a lower liquid-range temperature, for instance, life might have evolved on Jupiter. And if water had not existed at all, life might have evolved to fit some other substance altogether.

In every case, though, life would have evolved so neatly to fit whatever was at hand, that any form of that life high enough to consider the situation with sufficient subtlety would well feel justified in believing that intelligent and purposeful supernatural design was involved in something which, actually, the blind and random forces of evolution had produced.

And I suppose my delightful lady correspondent, if she were so hardy as to read through this essay carefully, would but feel herself further justified in her belief about the relationship of Scriptural language to myself.

But what can I do? I call the situation as I see it.

**There is also another property, more amazing than any of these, which I will take up next month.*

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In the course of publishing six stories by Gary Jennings (most recently "Tom Cat," July 1970), we've somehow neglected to provide any information about Mr. Jennings. So: "Born in Virginia, spent most of life in New York City, now live blissfully in flower-clad Mexican mountain town. Worked for ten years as an ad man, finally split with Madison Avenue to devote full time to freelance writing. Since then, have published six books of non-fiction (most recent, THE KILLER STORMS, *Lippincott) plus short stories, articles in almost all American magazines. The occasional fantasy story is my release valve, or sanity valve, between bouts of more nuts-and-bolts type writing."*

SPECIALIZATION

by Gary Jennings

WHITEHOUSE & PORTER, LTD., London brokers in expensive real estate, were not greatly surprised when Mr. Bergheim came in and announced that he wished to buy an English castle. Not a few portly, sixtyish, Bergheimish Americans entertained that dream. Nor were the brokers exactly confounded by his specification that the castle must be as authentic, as ancient, and as replete with ghosts as possible.

What did slightly astound and very much delight them was Mr. Bergheim's proudly announced intention to dismantle said castle and ship it, piece by piece and stone by stone, to be reconstructed on his Catskill mountain estate in New York. Not even the august firm of Whitehouse & Porter, Ltd., met clients with that kind of money nowadays. And Mr. Bergheim's choice of ardently colorful haberdashery and pungently odorous cigars did not exactly fit the British notion of even a *nouveau riche* American. But when Mr. Bergheim's letters of credit established his undeniable *richesse,* the Messrs. Whitehouse and Porter decided they could profitably overlook his rather obtrusive *nouveauté.*

In company with Mr. Porter himself, Mr. Bergheim conducted a long and arduous search through the shires of west England. He found, finally, in Wyllÿken Castle,

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the fulfillment of all his specifications: age, history, legend. And the castle certainly had its share of ghosts. Not only the main building; ghosts spilled out onto terraces, into gatehouses, gardens and moats.

All this was substantiated by Whitehouse & Porter, Ltd., with certain published minutes of the Royal Psychical Society, with histories of the neighborhood that dated back to Domesday Book, and with more recent signed testimonials from residents thereabouts. (While Mr. Bergheim was still considering the purchase, the neighbor folk had made a pretty show of shunning Wyllyken after dark. But Mr. B. was skeptically inclined to attribute this to a sagacious suggestion Mr. Porter might have planted in a local pub.)

When all the papers had been signed, Mr. Bergheim boldly took up residence in one of the castle's more habitable suites—"to get the feel of the place," he said. At the same time, he engaged platoons of engineers and experts to begin the arrangements for shipping Wyllyken to America.

Mr. Bergheim really enjoyed living at the castle, during the day, when the premises bustled with men going to and fro, measuring and making notes and figuring estimates. But after dark, when the men had all gone, Mr. Bergheim began seriously to doubt his wisdom in having given up his rooms in London.

He had hoped for ghosts. He had expected ghosts. The documents from Whitehouse & Porter, Ltd., had promised him ghosts. But the things that roamed the halls at midnight and skittered behind the old tapestries and rode revel in the subchambers—these things far surpassed the archives' discreet mentions of "dear Lady Furness's ghost" and "the shade of poor Mr. Clifford." Delightful as Wyllyken proved during the day, Mr. Bergheim began to find it absolutely frightening at night.

And it got even worse.

When, one twilight, a huge carved gargoyle on the west façade tired of contemplating the faraway meadows and decided to take a closer look at the ground, Mr. Bergheim found himself narrowly dodging a thundering ton of masonry.

And when he woke, in the middle of one dark night, to find the bedclothes oddly, uncomfortably and tightly wound about his pudgy neck, Mr. Bergheim began to wonder.

It appeared that he was not going to enjoy undisputed possession of Wyllyken. And he was loath to inflict such vengeful spirits on his quiet Catskill mountain community—even provided the ghosts would allow the castle to be transported that far. Mr. Bergheim saw no alternative but a total and per-

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manent dispossess of at least the rowdiest of his tenants. For this he needed expert help. Quietly and in the right places, Mr. Bergheim advertised for a ghost-hunter.

He got Sylvia.

She arrived late in the afternoon of the first day the advertisement appeared. Mr. Bergheim, from a tower window, watched her approach. She looked so like a young village girl, coming, as she did, across the western fields instead of along the highroad, that Mr. Bergheim decided he was being canvassed for a subscription or contribution of some sort. He half hoped that the workmen in the rear courtyard would distract her or send her away. But they were busy with their theodolites and plumb lines and didn't even notice the girl threading her way through the scattered scaffoldings in the yard. Resignedly, Mr. Bergheim plodded down the long stairs from his tower and found the girl waiting in the rear hall.

"Yes, my dear?" he said.

"You advertised for a ghost hunter," she said, briskly stripping off her gloves.

"Why, yes. But you can't be—"

"I'm not a professional, no," she said crisply. "But I've done a bit of work in that line. And I particularly think I can help *you*. My name is Sylvia Wyllyken, you see. You might say I'm familiar with this place."

"That would be helpful, I suppose. But I was thinking of someone, uh, huskier and—"

She gave a lyrical little laugh. "Come now, Mr. Bergheim. Surely you didn't expect to *heave* your ghosts off the premises?"

"Well, I don't exactly know the protocol of this sort of thing," he said, rather stiffly. "But I did expect to see some—some equipment."

Obviously she had brought nothing but her own trim little self, which included a piquantly pretty face under neat black bangs, a well-turned figure in a gray suit, and a pair of very candid brown eyes. Mr. Bergheim had to admit to himself that what she *had* brought was very nice.

"My equipment is up here," she said, tapping a forefinger to her temple. "You use wits and knowledge to hunt ghosts, not traps and brute force."

"You're welcome to have a try at the job," said Mr. Bergheim hesitantly. "But I think I'd better go on running the ad, just in—"

"No," she said firmly. "Cancel the advertisement. You can place it again if I fail. But I must work freely, without having to bother about competitors underfoot. If I don't succeed, it won't cost you a farthing. That's the way we ghost hunters work."

"All right, Miss Wyllyken," he said, with a shrug. "Have a go at it."

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"I'll need a room," she said. "Naturally I'll have to be here at night."

"Well, I—" Mr. Bergheim began, but Sylvia Wyllyken had wandered out of the hall and into the drafty old library. He followed, to find her looking around with great interest.

"It's been a long time since I've seen it in the daytime," she explained.

"When have you been here at night?"

"Oh, dances and things," she said. "Wyllyken was quite a gala place in the old days." She was walking around the room, tapping lightly on the walnut panels.

"I suppose you're trying to get right to work," said Mr. Bergheim, watching her. "But I don't think you'll really be able to—uh—get down to cases until after nightfall. That's when things begin to happen."

"Umn, I know," said the girl, dusting her hands. "Dame Denman comes out of one of these panels every morning about two o'clock, but I'm not sure which one."

Mr. Bergheim goggled.

"I told you I'm familiar with most of the estate's history," she reminded him. "But just the same, I'd appreciate seeing whatever archives you have."

Mr. Bergheim produced all the documents he owned. He left her poring over them and stepped outside to watch the engineers packing to leave for the day. When they had reported their latest conclusions on the problems and expenses of transporting Wyllyken, dusk was falling. Mr. Bergheim returned to the darkening library, where Sylvia still sat, a pale gray figure small in the recesses of a great leather chair.

"I've just thought," said Mr. Bergheim. "I don't have any servants at all in the house. Perhaps it would be—um—more proper if we postponed your moving in until I can hire somebody."

"Oh, I don't mind if you don't," she said offhandedly. And Mr. Bergheim felt a momentary twinge—at being too unattractively far along in years to make her feel any sense of impropriety at spending the night alone in the castle with him.

"Well, there's a room in the east wing," he muttered, "and I've got plenty of extra sheets and things."

"Fine," she said. "But I shan't need it tonight. You and I are going to sit up and do a little ghost hunting." She waved him to a chair. "Sit down, now, and I'll tell you a little about the ghosts of Wyllyken."

Mr. Bergheim plumped down in a chair across the room. Sylvia was just a pale blur in the gloom.

"I assume you just want to get rid of the most—dangerous spirits," she said. "Some of them are

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quite harmless, and most of them are only playful. But some, I fear, are definitely anti-mortal or anti-you. There's Lady Agatha Wyllyken, for example. She had a habit of poisoning women who were unfortunate enough to be both her peer in beauty and her overnight guests. Agatha was hanged in 1810. I'm afraid her spirit is antipathetic toward your intention of moving the castle. But she's a simple soul. A notice to the papers that you've abandoned your intention—even though you don't mean it—should calm her down."

She paused and looked at Mr. Bergheim, who said nothing.

"Lady Agatha still has the rope they hanged her with," Sylvia prompted gently.

"I'll phone the papers first thing in the morning," Mr. Bergheim said hastily.

"Then there's Roderick West," said Sylvia, consulting the documents in her lap. "I daresay you've heard him racketing about in the cellars. That's where he disappeared, in 1705."

"I've heard *some*thing in the cellars," said Mr. Bergheim. Sylvia nodded.

"Well, I understand you're safe until you *see* him," she said cryptically. "We'll dig up his bones tonight—I think they're in the subcellar under the kitchens. You can dump them in the river, or bury them in consecrated ground, and you'll be rid of him."

Mr. Bergheim got up, shivering, and touched a match to a brace of candles ensconced on the wall over his chair. The light was welcome, but it brought with it a host of deep and unwelcome shadows.

"And—let's see," Sylvia went on, riffling through the papers. "Oh, yes. The bride that Major Sir Ambrose Wyllyken brought back from his Pakistan campaign. Beautiful girl, I believe, but she seems to have brought along some unpleasant habits. They found Major Ambrose rather bloodily dead in his bed one morning—and burned his bride at the stake for a vampire."

Mr. Bergheim lit another pair of candles.

"Must you go on about them so—familiarly?" he asked faintly. "I feel like they're breathing down my neck."

"Familiarity breeds contempt, you know," she quoted airily. "And I *am* related to them all. That should enable me to anticipate their actions better than an outsider. I think you'll be quite safe while I'm around."

Mr. Bergheim moved his chair closer to hers.

"I want to start on Dame Denman first," Sylvia said professionally. "She's the one who comes out of those panels behind you."

Mr. Bergheim hastily swung his chair around.

"She had her head whacked off

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by a drunken footman, while she was visiting here in 1768," said Sylvia. "She's never got over it. She still appears without her head."

"Is she—er—hostile, too?" Mr. Bergheim asked nervously.

"Oh, yes. To all who come here. Without her head, she can't tell whether they're drunken footmen or not, you see."

Sylvia Wyllyken certainly sounded competent, Mr. Bergheim decided, but hardly comforting. She inspired in him a tendency to keep whirling around in starts.

"I think we might as well dispense with Dame Denman right now, before her time to appear," said Sylvia, standing up and brushing dust from her skirt. "We have to find her head. It should be cached behind a panel."

Mr. Bergheim watched, unable to move, while the girl conscientiously tapped on one walnut slab after another. The fifth or sixth one gave out a hollow "tonk, tonk." Mr. Bergheim fought an urge to get up and run, as Sylvia pressed a catch concealed somewhere and the panel slid silently, slowly back. Candlelight shone into a box-like depression in the wall, in which a white and grinning skull gleamed almost phosphorescently.

"Not much left of the old girl, is there?" Sylvia said brightly, as she lifted it out, tucked it under her arm and reclosed the panel.

"Wh-what do we do with that?" inquired Mr. Bergheim, after some effort. He circled around behind his chair as Sylvia walked by him, the skull leering out from under her tanned arm.

"Oh, burn it. Or chuck it away," said the girl. "No hurry. When she comes looking for it and finds it gone, she'll blame the footman as usual and go shrieking off to hell or someplace."

Mr. Bergheim winced at the prospect of being wakened some dark night by Dame Denman's "shrieking off to hell or someplace."

"Well, we've covered the Dame, young Roderick and Lady Agatha," said Sylvia, setting the skull on a table and checking her list. "They're apt to be the most impulsive three."

"The most *impulsive* three!" Mr. Bergheim exclaimed in agitation, as he tremblingly covered Dame Denman's remains with a newspaper. "What in God's name are the others like?"

"Oh, there are all sorts of ghosts," said Sylvia, gracefully seating herself. "They bear all sorts of different grudges—some personal, some general. Some of them are after you as a matter of family pride. You know, your wanting to move the castle. Some of them are just out for revenge on all mortals, like Roddy West. Others, I'm afraid, are *loup-garou*. They live—perhaps I should say

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exist—on human flesh or blood." She looked pointedly at Mr. Bergheim's belt line.

"Great heavens," muttered Mr. Bergheim, mopping his forehead. "Can such things be?"

"Wyllyken is a very old place," she said. "All kinds of people have lived and died here. And, long before Wyllyken, there were eons of fey things. Saxon and Runic cults. The Druids. The Picts. Maybe there are even caveman ghosts. But you don't have to worry about them. When you move the castle, you'll leave all of them behind."

Mr. Bergheim was glad to hear, at least, that his Catskill neighbors would not have to play host to *all* of Britain's ancient afflictions.

Sylvia continued: "All these spirits, of course, are eternally vying with each other. For instance, when you moved in, it undoubtedly started considerable competition among the spirits who wanted to drive you away, those who wanted to frighten you to death, and the ones who wanted to—eat you. Like jackals fighting for . . ."

"Please," said Mr. Bergheim, twitching uncontrollably. "Don't go on."

Sylvia rose and crossed the room to lay a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry," she said sincerely. "I wasn't trying to shock you. It's just that you'll be better able to defend yourself when you know what you're up against."

"I had no idea," said Mr. Bergheim. He said it three or four times.

"I think we can deal with the impulsive ones immediately," she went on, leaving her hand on his shoulder. "It's the careful, creepy, slow-but-sure ones that are the most trouble. They're frightfully hard to predict."

"Why?" squeaked Mr. Bergheim.

"Well, they're generally the ones with the most to gain—the eaters, for example—and they'll go to great lengths to get it. Disguise, deception, ambush."

Mr. Bergheim stared anxiously at a canvas-shrouded chair in one corner, finding it suddenly suspicious. Sylvia noticed his worried gaze and took pity on him. "But most of them," she said cheerfully, "are really a lot of fun. So you'll have lots of *nice* ghosts to show your American friends, when we've disposed of the rest." The calm assurance in her voice made Mr. Bergheim feel much better.

"I'm really glad you came, Miss Wyllyken," he said. "And I'm sorry I doubted you at first."

With a laugh, she took his hand and led him toward the terrace windows. "It's quite dark enough now to get a look at some of your tenants," she said. "Come."

With some misgivings, Mr. Bergheim let her lead him outside onto the terrace. A full moon gave

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an eerie glow to the sweep of lawn that undulated down to the topiary hedges by the main fence. The east wing of the castle glowered down at them, the serrated battlements like hard square teeth, the windows gleaming in the moonlight like so many stark, dead eyes. Mr. Bergheim shuddered. How had he dared to spend so many nights alone in this charnel house?

Suddenly the shrubbery under the balustrade rustled convulsively. Mr. Bergheim's hand tightened on Sylvia's.

The little white ghost of a Scotch terrier, palely luminous, scampered out of the bushes and down across the long lawn. About halfway to the hedges, the wee animal vanished abruptly.

"That's where he was struck by lightning," said Sylvia matter-of-factly. "One ghost you don't have to be afraid of."

Mr. Bergheim managed a weak smile. Sylvia turned and pointed at the east wing. "There's another harmless little spirit," she said.

Mr. Bergheim followed her arm with his eyes. On the very top of the battlements, a tiny boy in a broad white collar stood balanced precariously. His arms outstretched like a tight-rope walker's, he was moving from one serration to the next, slow step after slow step. Startled at seeing the child in such peril of falling, Mr. Bergheim gasped and turned to run for the hallway stairs. Sylvia restrained him.

"Don't," she said gently. "He fell a hundred and eighty years ago."

Mr. Bergheim paused, his eyes wide with wonder. There was a brief pale flicker down past the mullioned windows. The wind wailed softly.

Sylvia tugged at his arm. "Come back inside," she said. "We've work to do."

It was a haggard and bloodshot Bergheim who conducted Sylvia Wyllyken to her room, at cock-crow, and then staggered off to his own. Only sheer exhaustion could have brought sleep to a man whose mind crawled with so many remembered horrors. All night long, he had helped the girl to dig in sequestered graves, to pry at cold and slimy cellar stones, to drive sharpened stakes into sunken old graves, and to burn noisome powders in long-locked rooms.

As testimony to their labors, a pile of derelict bones, shreds of musty cerements, and mouldering old brass bound trunks lay in the middle of the front hall. "Burn them, or dump them in the river," she had said, with what he felt was rather callous indifference. After all, these poor relics were the mortal remains of—of what?

Of the thing in black that had followed them, hooting, around the grounds—until they had planted an ash sapling on a cer-

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tain grave, and the thing had disappeared with a despairing screech. Of the invisible something that had whispered foul threats in the dank, dark cellars. Of the rigid blue body that had toppled from the nailed-up closet in an upstairs room and poofed into dust and ashes on hitting the floor . . .

They had all been things decayed and terrible and seemingly as malevolent toward Sylvia as toward himself. But she had walked among them unmoved, in confidence. It may have been her serene fearlessness but, whatever, the things had seemed powerless to harm him while she was near.

But the most unexpected moment, the moment that Mr. Bergheim remembered last before he drifted off to sleep, had come at the very end of their adventures—when he escorted Sylvia to her chambers. At the door she had turned and planted a swift kiss on Mr. Bergheim's plump cheek. "You were wonderful," she had whispered, and quickly shut the door.

The first thing Mr. Bergheim did, on awakening near noon, was to put through the promised telephone calls to all the local newspapers, announcing his revised intention to let Wyllyken castle remain on Wyllyken ground. That done, he mentally crossed off Lady Agatha from his list.

The engineers, already in evidence, spent the day working, and went away about five o'clock. Sylvia stayed all day in her rooms, presumably searching the manor archives for more spirits to be laid. For his part, Mr. Bergheim fetched a large sack and gathered into it the grisly mess in the front hall. He drove into the village and presented the sack to a rather nonplussed curate, with the expressed hope that he would know best "how to dispose of it."

That night again, and for many nights afterward, Sylvia and Mr. Bergheim roamed the halls and walkways of Wyllyken castle, and many were the strange things they encountered. But Sylvia seemed always to know the precise charm, the correct incantation, the proper powders to burn, to send the spectres howling into oblivion.

"It makes our task much easier," she confided to Mr. Bergheim, "that they're all fighting over you among themselves." This gave Mr. Bergheim the uncomfortable feeling of being a solitary juicy mouse among ravenous cats. But, ever mindful of Sylvia's complimentary "you were wonderful," he managed to stand his ground in every encounter. Toward the last, he was walking in comparative equanimity among ghouls and ghosties that would have chilled Bram Stoker.

He even found himself dreading the day when the exorcism of Wyllyken would be complete, so

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much did he enjoy Sylvia's companionship. When they stood together in some dark alcove, awaiting the scheduled appearance of some hair-raising horror, Mr. Bergheim could think of nothing but the closeness of her dear self.

He was not entirely unhopeful that his feeling was reciprocated. Several times he surprised her glancing at him with an affectionate—or perhaps just motherly possessive—half smile on her red lips. It may have been self-delusion, he cautioned himself, but . . .

When the supply of ghosts-to-be-daunted seemed to be dwindling, he took to searching the archives himself, in hopes of finding some expendable spirit previously overlooked. He even made Sylvia spend one whole unnecessary night chasing and routing two playful poltergeists who were guilty of nothing more serious than a little crockery breakage.

But the last day had come; the day when Sylvia told him her work was done.

It was early morning. The sun had barely come up, and they had just returned from laying the shade of one Bess Bolingbroke, axmurderess. They sat down wearily in the library, and Mr. Bergheim mixed himself a stiff eye-opener.

"It's all done," said Sylvia, with a tired smile. "The competition is dispensed with."

"All of Wyllyken castle," said Mr. Bergheim, with a gesture, "for just you and me."

"And a few ghosts who won't be troublesome," she amended, "like little Lord Pemberton and the Scotty dog."

"Now we must discuss your fee," he said. "God knows you've earned it."

She smiled modestly.

"Well," said Mr. Bergheim, turning pink. "I have a sort of—a sort of proposition to make." She gave him an expectant, half-amused look. "Perhaps you know, Sylvia, how much I've come to—to care for you, since we've been together." He found himself flustered by her waiting gaze. She murmured a polite thank-you.

"As payment for what you've done," Mr. Bergheim blurted out, more loudly than he'd intended, "I'm offering you all this." He waved one arm in a wide, all-including sweep. "Everything I own."

She waited, still silent, her dark eyes fixed on him. By God, thought Mr. Bergheim, she's been expecting this. She knows I love her.

He got up and went to sit down beside her on the arm of her chair. "Sylvia . . ." He colored again and floundered for a moment. "Sylvia, will you marry me?"

The girl lowered her eyes but, before she could reply, Mr. Bergheim plunged on. "I know I'm not much to look at. And I'm a

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good deal older than you. But I've got money—a lot of money. And this beautiful old castle. Thanks to you, it'll make us a fine home. And Sylvia, I'd—I'd do anything for you . . ."

She halted his staccato outburst with a slim finger laid gently across his lips.

"Silly old darling," she murmured, with a smile. "What do I care about all that? All I want is your heart."

"Oh, Sylvia," Mr. Bergheim breathed hoarsely, in rapture. "My heart *is* yours."

He drew her to him, and almost passionately she nestled her head on his breast, nuzzling hungrily toward his living heart.

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